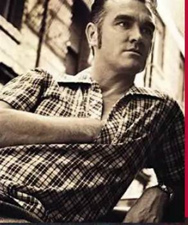

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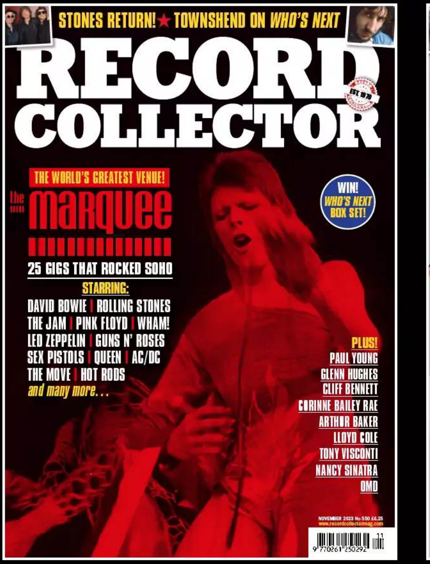
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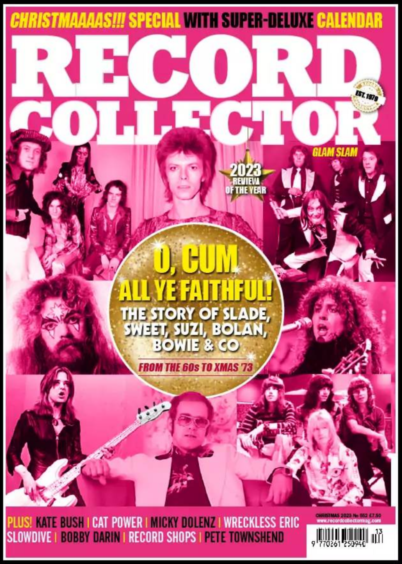
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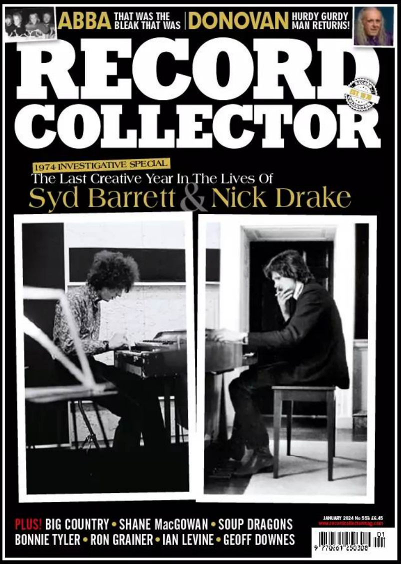
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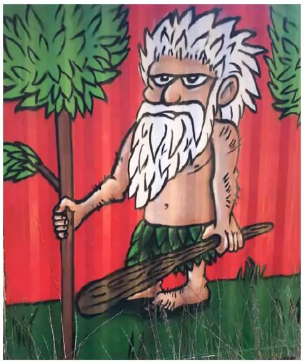

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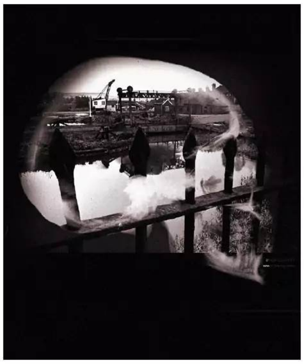

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EDITOR
DAVID SUTTON
drsutton@forteantimes.com
FOUNDING EDITORS
BOB RICKARD (ft-bobrickard@mail.com)
PAUL SIEVEKING (sieveking@forteantimes.com)
NEWS EDITOR
IAN SIMMONS (simmons@forteantimes.com)
ART DIRECTOR
ETIENNE GILFILLAN (etienne@forteantimes.com)
BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR
DAVID V BARRETT (dvbarrett@forteantimes.com)
EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
ABIGAIL MASON
RESIDENT CARTOONIST
HUNT EMERSON
PRODUCTION MANAGER
LEE BOYMAN (lee.boyman@metropolis.co.uk)
ADVERTISING
BEN LORTON (ben.lorton@metropolis.co.uk)

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david.saunders@metropolis.co.uk

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ETIENNE GILFILLAN

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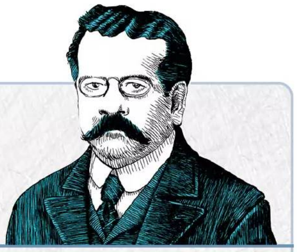
EDITORIAL



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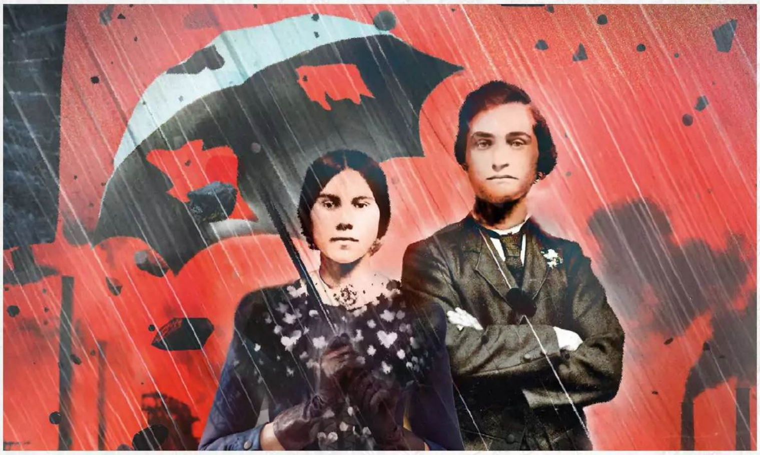

ETIENNE GILFILLAN

INDUSTRIAL FORTEANA

There's a distinct whiff of industry to proceedings this month, with three stories from England, the United States and Germany connected with the worlds of coal, iron and steel.

First, Paul Cropper – a long-time investigator of all sorts of strangeness, with a particular interest in poltergeist cases – returns to the pages of *FT* with the fascinating, if little-known, case of a stone-throwing polt in 19th century America. In the city of Akron, Ohio – a hive of heavy industrial activity – a family of German immigrants was subjected to a week-long bombardment of stones both outside and inside their home. Despite the presence of crowds of curiosity-seekers, police, numerous reporters (including one William Clemens, cousin to Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain) and a local priest, no satisfactory explanation for the mysterious stone-throwing was ever found. Suspicion, as so often in such cases, fell on nine-year-old Emma Metzler, but there was also talk of the 72-year-old grandmother being a witch. Even in a booming industrial city like Akron, patterns of belief from the old world were not uncommon.

The Metzlers hailed from Bavaria – as, these days, does *FT*'s own Steve Toase, who became intrigued by the lore and iconography of his new home town of Naila. The town's coat of arms shows a classic *Wilder Mann*, or wild man, standing between a pair of trees and brandishing a formidable-looking club. Naila's *Wilder Mann* is a popular figure, represented in statues and graffiti and portrayed in local events, but he is far from unique. As Steve found, the wider area is rich in wild man (and sometimes wild woman) imagery and folklore, all of it seemingly connected with the region's historic mining industry – there's even a town with the name of Wildemann.

Closer to home, Rob Gandy explores the post-industrial ghosts of Tipton, a West Midlands town of coal yards and canals that was once a crucible of the Industrial Revolution. Rob shares the stories of one man's haunted lifetime and his weird experiences in and around Tipton, ranging from seeing the apparition of his own cousin to a summer evening's time-slip.

ERRATA

FT438:31: Darren Ritson, author of this issue's "The Poltergeist: Cases of Contagion" feature, spotted an editorial error in a photo caption, which refers to "284 Green Street, Ealing"; this should, of course, have been "284 Green Street, Enfield".

FT439:68: In this issue's "It Happened to Me" section, the letter entitled "The boy in the red anorak" should have been attributed to Nick Maloret, Milton, Hampshire."

FT439:37: The eagle-eyed Rob Gandy spotted a mistake in Chris Wheatley's "Cursed Video Games" article, pointing out: "It reads 'This is an obvious reference to the assignation of Abraham Lincoln'. I think that it should read "This is an obvious reference to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln". After all, Lincoln was accompanied by his wife when he was murdered by Booth at the theatre rather than some 'other woman' with whom he had an assignation!" Thanks too to the equally attentive Max Garod of Carrs Creek, New South Wales, Australia, who also wrote in to point out this howler.

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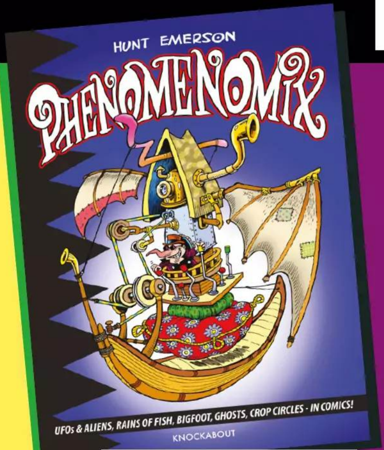
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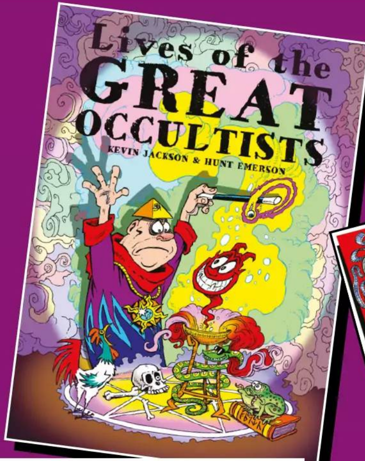
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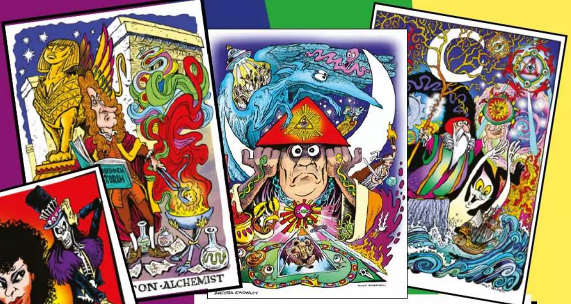
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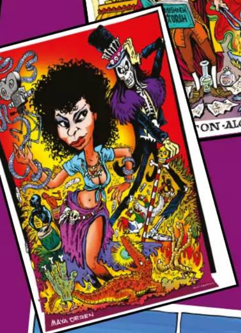

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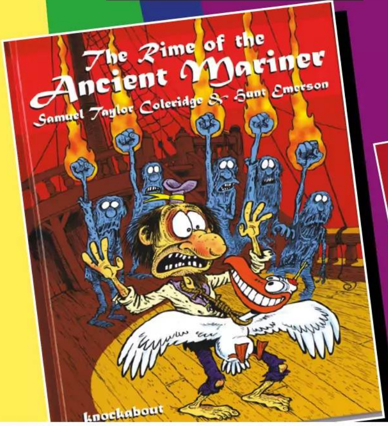
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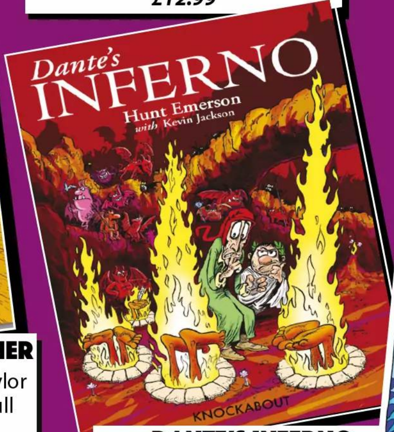
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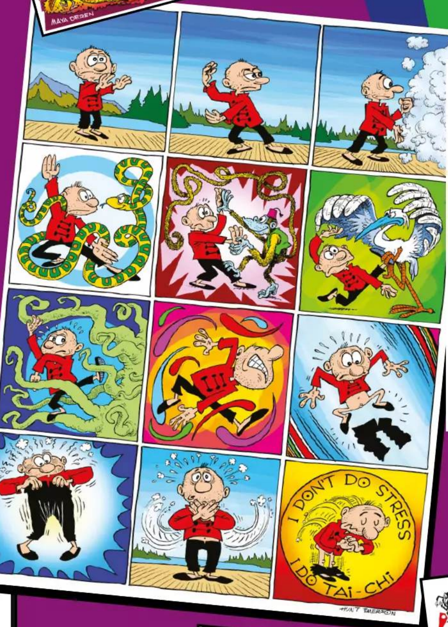
I DON'T DO STRESS
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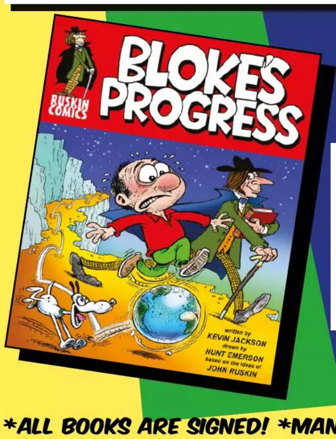
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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

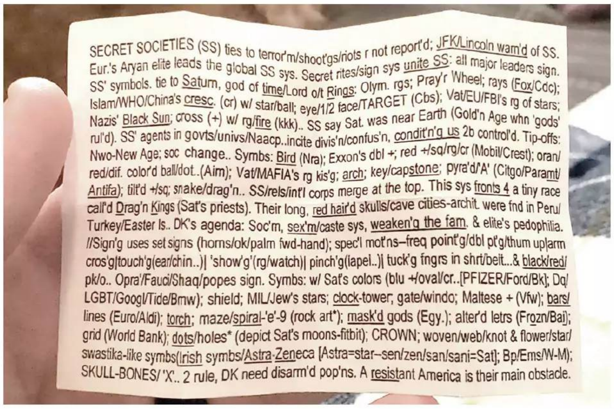
CRYPTIC COMMUNICATIONS

Weird notes found in grocery items and a mystery solved

CEREAL CHILLER

In late December 2023 Joe Miller of Sugarloaf Township, Pennsylvania, opened a box of Lucky Charms Smores cereal and a mysterious cryptic note fell out. Believing the note had been in the sealed bag, he was somewhat unnerved and refused to eat any of the cereal, saying, "It just bothers me… it's the note that really bothers me". Neatly printed on a small rectangular piece of paper, the note had "LIES" prominently printed on it twice, accompanied by a highly abbreviated and largely incomprehensible message that began "SECRET soc. r tied to drugs/riots/terror/m… JFK warn'd of SS. A sign/*word/ sumb. sys unites **SS**. It's tied to Saturn, Lord o/t Rings/time: Toyota rgs; NBC/CIA's bird: cross (+) w/ rg/fire (Bayer/KKK); Yale/Harv.'s shield; cube/sq (D. of Ed.); *PYRA'D/A..(Paramt); eye/1/2face/Target; Nazis' black sun; SPIRAL/e/6/9..(Disney)" and continued in the same vein at some length. Miller reported his find to the FBI, who added it to their growing "mystery note" file.

The FBI had been receiving reports of almost identical messages from across Pennsylvania for more than three years, with most of the texts coming from Schuylkill County, earning the case its name of "The Schuylkill Notes". They have turned up in various brands of cereal, but also in chocolate bars, pasta, dog food, cake mix, candy, PopTarts, cookies, Lunchables, gauze bandages and, in one case, a pack of Infant Tylenol. Other people had found the notes in the pockets of clothing bought in thrift stores, scattered on the floor of a hardware shop and even pinned to trees on walking trails. None of the products containing the notes seems to have been tampered with or contaminated in any way apart from having a note inserted. A woman named only as Gianna, who got a note in a box of Belvita biscuits, said, "Super creepy and sad to see so many people receiving these". The content of the texts varies slightly, but all are in the same vein and follow the same format. While Miller and others suspected that the message had been in the sealed inner bag of his cereal, it is thought that this is unlikely, as it would need access to manufacturers and would make it very difficult to target Pennsylvania specifically. It is more likely that an individual or small group of people is sneaking the notes into the outer packaging of items in stores. *Skeptical Inquirer* has demonstrated how this could be done quickly and easily without apparently breaking the external seal on packaging.



SECRET SOCIETIES (SS) ties to terror'm/shoot'gs/riots r not report'd; JFK/Lincoln warn'd of SS.
Eur.'s Aryan elite leads the global SS sys. Secret rites/sign sys unite SS: all major leaders sign.
SS' symbols. tie to Saturn, god of time/Lord o/t Rings: Olym. rgs; Pray'r Wheel; rays (Fox/Cdc);
Islam/WHO/China's cresc. (cr) w/ star/ball; eye/1/2 face/TARGET (Cbs); Vat/EU/FBI's rg of stars;
Nazis' Black Sun; cross (+) w/ rg/fire (kkk).. SS say Sat. was near Earth (Gold'n Age whn 'gods'
rul'd). SS' agents in govts/univs/Naacp..incite divis'n/confus'n, condit'n'g us 2b control'd. Tip-offs:
Nwo-New Age; soc change.. Symbs: Bird (Nra); Exxon's dbl +; red +/sq/rg/cr (Mobil/Crest); oran/
red/dif. color'd ball/dot..(Aim); Vat/MAFIA's rg kis'g; arch; key/capstone; pyra'd/'A' (Citgo/Paramt/
Antifa); tilt'd +/sq; snake/drag'n.. SS/rels/int'l corps merge at the top. This sys fronts 4 a tiny race
call'd Drag'n Kings (Sat's priests). Their long, red hair'd skulls/cave cities-archit. were fnd in Peru/
Turkey/Easter Is.. DK's agenda: Soc'm, sex'm/caste sys, weaken'g the fam. & elite's pedophilia.
//Sign'g uses set signs (horns/ok/palm fwd-hand); spec'l mot'ns–freq point'g/dbl pt'g/thum up|arm
cros'g|touch'g(ear/chin..)| 'show'g'(rg/watch)| pinch'g(lapel..)| tuck'g fngrs in shrt/belt...& black/red/
pk/o.. Opra'/Fauci/Shaq/popes sign. Symbs: w/ Sat's colors (blu +/oval/cr..[PFIZER/Ford/Bk]; Dq/
LGBT/Googl/Tide/Bmw); shield; MIL/Jew's stars; clock-tower; gate/windo; Maltese + (Vfw); bars/
lines (Euro/Aldi); torch; maze/spiral-'e'-9 (rock art*); mask'd gods (Egy.); alter'd letrs (Frozn/Bai);
grid (World Bank); dots/holes* (depict Sat's moons-fitbit); CROWN; woven/web/knot & flower/star/
swastika-like symbs(Irish symbs/Astra-Zeneca [Astra=star–sen/zen/san/sani=Sat]; Bp/Ems/W-M);
SKULL-BONES/ 'X'.. 2 rule, DK need disarm'd pop'ns. A resistant America is their main obstacle.

LEFT & BELOW: Typical 'Schuylkill Notes' found in a packet of cream cheese and on a hiking trail.

> *"Super creepy and sad to see so many people receiving these"*

As to what the notes actually mean, one social media commentator said, "worst recipe ever", but Schuykill community website coalregioncanary.com attempted to decipher the messages by putting the text through ChatGPT-4 to see if it would clarify anything. They concluded that the notes were trying to alert people to secret societies manipulating world events, using major companies and public institutions to do so, claiming they were involved in everything from riots to terrorism. The writers were also trying to reveal the various symbols, shapes and colours that signified the societies' involvement, as well as hand signals and other movements that would betray the participation of prominent people such as Oprah Winfrey and Elon Musk. They also seem to believe that these secret societies are themselves a front for an ancient race known as "Dragon Kings" who are using surveillance, debt, inflation, societal confusion and misconduct by the elite to spread confusion and exert control over the population. The writers suggest that while resistance is growing, the Dragon Kings are seeking to disarm the population to prevent this.

Despite FBI involvement – interfering with or contaminating food is a federal offence – no one has yet been arrested, and despite widespread CCTV surveillance, no one has even been spotted sneaking a note into any product in a store. As a result, there is no obvious lead as to who might be responsible, and whether it might be an individual or a group, although the content and nature of the texts suggests beliefs and attitudes close to those of the more extreme end of QAnon. *skepticalinquirer.org, 14 Apr 2022; coalregioncanary.com, 11 Jun; dailymail.co.uk, 20 Dec; wtaj.com, 29 Dec 2023; pahomepage.com, 8 Jan 2023, 10 Jan 2024.*

DRESS CODE

In 2013, archæologist and vintage dress collector Sara Rivers Cofield bought "a textbook mid-1880s silk bustle dress" in extremely good condition from an antique mall in Seaport, Maine. On examining her buy, she discovered a hidden pocket

WELSH TIDY MOUSE

OCD rodent declutters man's shed

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THE ALCHEMY OF ICE

Noctilucent clouds and icy oddities

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VALENSOLE VISIONS

Alien visitors or memories of World War II?

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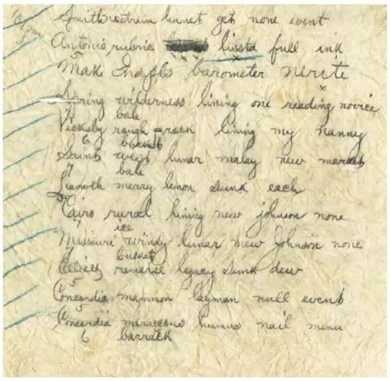
SARA RIVERS COFIELD / COMMITMENT TO COSTUMES

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

LEFT: The 1880s silk dress in which Sara Rivers Cofield found two mysterious notes in a concealed pocket. **BELOW**: One of the notes containing strings of seemingly unconnected words. **ABOVE**: The code was cracked by computer analyst Wayne Chan.

concealed beneath an overskirt. "It's a bit of a private spot – it almost seems like it was protected," she said. In the pocket were two crumpled pieces of paper. Each piece contained strings of words with no obvious connection or meaning; One line, for example, was "Bismark, omit, leafage, buck, bank," while another read "Calgary, Cuba, unguard, confute, duck, fagan". In total, there were 23 of these lines. Puzzled, Rivers Cofield posted the texts on her blog and asked for anyone's thoughts on their meaning. Word about this apparent baffling and indecipherable code swiftly spread and it was soon listed as one of the world's "50 Most Unsolvable Codes" on the cryptology blog Cipherbrain alongside the Voynich Manuscript (**FT130:42-46, 260:58-59, 345:38-53**) and the Zodiac Killer's messages. Many people tried their hand at cracking it, generating a lot of theories about its meaning, ranging from it having something to do with the American Civil War – although that was over 20 years before the dress was made – to it simply being dress making instructions.



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7 ice
Missouri windy lunar new Johnson none
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Ellis remorse legacy dunk dew
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Concordia mammon layman null event
5
Concordia marvellous humus nail menu
6 barrack

No one made much of a dent in unravelling what had become known as "the Silk Dress Cryptogram" until someone said: "That's a telegraph code". These were common in the 19th century when telegraph was the predominant means of rapid long-distance communication. As messages were charged by the word, a code where a phrase or a sentence was represented by a single code word made them a lot cheaper to send. Also, because any telegraph message was read by several people during transmission and reception, codes also helped make them confidential. This clue caught University of Manitoba research computer analyst Wayne Chan's attention, and he set out to track down the code. "I went through 170 code books, and I ended up not finding anything that matched this," he said. However, the date the dress was made helped him narrow the possible candidates and the structure of the lines gave him a clue as to what they might be.

Texts beginning with a place name, followed by five to seven words, were typical of weather messages he found in his search, so he contacted the archives of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). There he found a copy of the 1897 US Signals Service Weather Code that matched the messages exactly. The dress had belonged to someone involved in transmitting weather information, who had put a couple of messages in their pocket and forgotten about them. With the code, Chan could understand the messages: "Bismark Omit leafage buck bank" was a weather observation for 27 May 1888 from Bismarck, North Dakota. "Leafage" meant the dew point was 32F at 10pm. "Buck" described clear skies, no precipitation and a north wind. "Bank" meant wind velocity of 12mph. So, not some deep, dark or scandalous secret – just the weather in 1888. *cbc.ca, 31 Dec 2023; smithsonian.com, 8 Jan 2024.*

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

STIFF COMPETITION FOR 'LEAST POPULAR AUSTRALIAN MAN'

Irish Times, 19 June 2023.

Drunken women convicted of torturing singing parrot

BBC News, 19 July 2023.

NUKE REACTOR LAB HIT BY 'GAY FURRY HACKERS' DEMANDING CAT-HUMAN MUTANTS

The Register, 22 Nov 2023.

Cathedral protest awakens dead organist who urinated on the Dean

slippedisc.com, 30 Nov 2023.

TESCO RECALLS CHRISTMAS STUFFING MIX BECAUSE IT MAY CONTAIN MOTHS

BBC News, 14 Dec 2023.

SIDELINES

HORNET SHOCK

Whoever stole an industrial vacuum cleaner from beekeeper Don Shump's truck in Philadelphia was likely to get more than they bargained for. "The vacuum was there because it was filled with European hornet queens," said Shump, who had just used it to extract a nest of the insects from a local building. "Those girls should be full of life and extra spicy. I anxiously await your unboxing video." *6abc.com, 26 Sept 2023.*

FINGERED

When Liam Jones, 27, attempted to rob Barclays Bank in Llandudno, North Wales, all he got was a one-year prison sentence. Having burst into the bank wearing a mask, he gave cashier Karren Star a note saying, "Give me all your money or I'll shoot". However, Star realised that Jones's 'gun' was just his hand making a gun shape in his pocket and that he was shaking, so she tried to stall him until police got there. Jones, though, lost his nerve and fled, running straight into the arms of arriving police. He later told officers he "couldn't really remember" what had happened in the bank. *metro.co.uk, 26 Oct 2023.*

LEG MAN

David Bennet, 84, from Derby, is hoping to get into record books for having the world's largest collection of leg-shaped trinkets. He has 170, ranging from nutcrackers to golf tees. "They call me the leg man – I must be the only one with this hobby" said Bennet "there's a story behind each item." *Metro, 6 Oct 2023.*

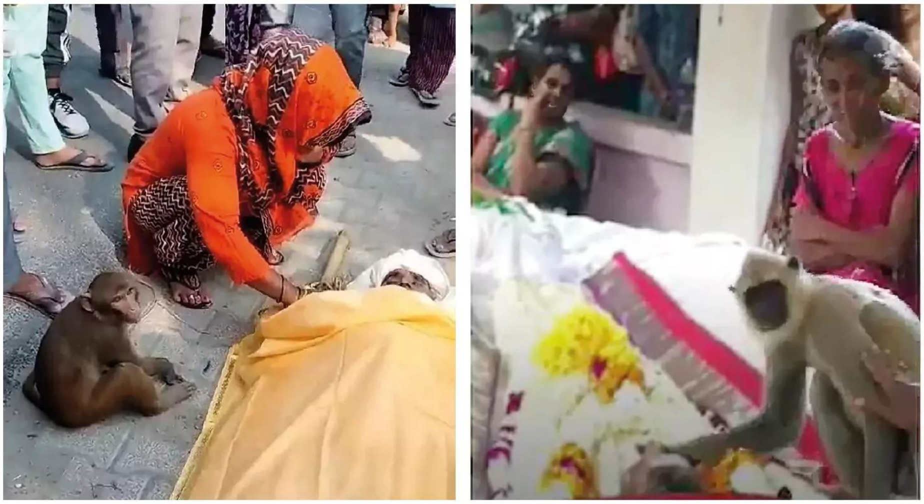
DEAD LEGS

At Porton Down laboratory, Home Office research scientists are examining the possibility of training cadaver detection dogs using amputated legs donated by consenting patients. A spokesperson explained such studies "are vital to evolving our capabilities." *D.Mirror, 14 Sept 2023.*

MARTIN ROSS

ANIMAL NEWS

Mourning monkeys, orcas behaving badly and the amazing 'Welsh Tidy Mouse'



ABOVE LEFT: A langur travelled 25 mlles with the body of his human friend Ramkunwar Singh to attend the man's funeral in Amroha, Uttar Pradesh. **ABOVE RIGHT**: A grey langur attends the funeral of Peetambaram Rajan in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka.

MONKEY MOURNERS

For the last few months of his life, Ramkunwar Singh from Amroha, Uttar Pradesh, India, regularly fed a local monkey. Although it is described as a "chimp" in the newspaper article, it is clear from the photos that this was a langur; chimps aren't native to India and are apes, not monkeys. After Singh's passing, the langur repaid his affection by mourning at his funeral, following the body 25 miles (40km) to get to it. Photos show the monkey clinging to the yellow sheet covering Singh's body on the car carrying it down a motorway. Once at the funeral, video shows it sitting next to the corpse alongside family members, apparently weeping along with them. It is reported that the monkey remained with the body through all the rituals and procedures until Singh's corpse was put on the funeral pyre.

Shortly before, another monkey had reportedly joined a funeral, this time at Gondhia, also in Uttar Pradesh. It had regularly been fed by farmer Chandanlal Verma and when he died, this monkey also attended the funeral, sitting with mourners and at one point lifting Verma's shroud and staring into his face; later it also put its paw on the knee of one of the female mourners, apparently in sympathy. This behaviour has also been reported from Sri Lanka, where Peetambaram Rajan, from Batticaloa, was mourned at his funeral by a grey langur that he had fed with fruit and biscuits every day. It, too, sat with mourners, and reportedly became so distraught after looking at Rajan in his coffin that other mourners had to carry it away. *dailystar.co.uk, 14 Sept, 14 Oct 2023.*

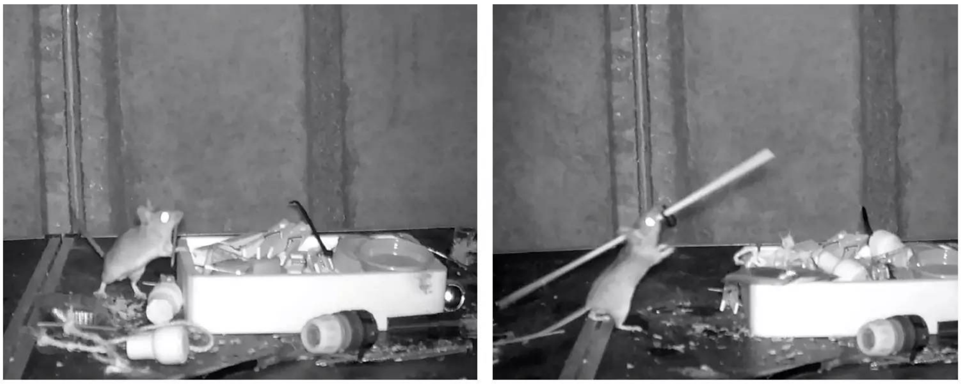
The monkey remained with the body through all the rituals and procedures

DOG AT THE WHEEL!

Police in Sterusy, near Bratislava, Slovakia, were unimpressed by the explanation they got when they pulled over a car apparently being driven by a large brown hunting dog. The owner insisted that the animal had suddenly jumped into his lap as he was driving, but CCTV footage showed that no sudden movement had taken place, suggesting the dog had been at the wheel for some time, sitting on the owner's lap. The cops issued a fine to the car's owner, but it's not clear whether this was for speeding or failing to secure an animal in a moving vehicle, or both. *BBC News, 30 Sept 2023.*

ORCAS BEING DICKS

A necropsy on a female orca found beached on one of the Commander Islands in the Bering Sea off the Russian Far East found a surprising cause of death. The whale had apparently choked to death while trying to swallow a sea otter whole. Not only was there an entire otter jammed between her oral cavity and oesophagus, but there were seven more intact otters in the animal's stomach. "It is very unusual, because orcas don't normally eat sea otters," said Olga Filatova, a cetacean researcher at Moscow State University, adding, "They normally don't swallow prey whole – they usually tear it apart and eat only the best (most fatty) parts." It would have been quite a challenge for an orca to scoff entire sea otters, as these can reach up to 5ft (1.5m) long as adults; researchers hypothesise that the orca might have taken this desperate step because she was starving. Genetic analysis revealed that she was also a long way from home. Her DNA showed she was part of a population known as "Bigg's killer whales"



RODNEY HOLBROOK

ABOVE: 'Welsh Tidy Mouse' hard at work in retired postman Rodney Holbrook's shed in Builth Wells, Powys.

that normally ranges between the Aleutian Islands off Alaska and the coast of California, and this is the first time an orca from this population has been found in the western Pacific. The discovery of the sea otters in the orca's gut could suggest a solution to another mystery, though. In recent years the sea otter population in the Aleutians and the Gulf of Alaska has been dwindling for no obvious reasons, and while some scientists have suspected orcas were responsible, this is the first direct evidence of an orca from that region eating sea otters.

In South Africa, the new eating habits of two local male orcas known as Port and Starboard are believed to be the reason that hundreds of great white sharks have vanished from off the Western Cape. The whales seem to have developed a taste for shark livers and have been targeting great whites, sevengill and bronze whaler sharks, ripping out their livers and leaving the rest of their bodies to rot. In February, their shark-killing spree is believed to have claimed 19 in a single day, with many mutilated bodies washing up near Pearly Beach, a village located along the southernmost tip of South Africa. As a result, it is believed that the white shark population has fled the area en masse, relocating further east in a move that could have serious repercussions for the local ecology and economy, which depends in part on running shark spotting tours for visitors.

Meanwhile, the pod of orcas in the Strait of Gibraltar, led by a female known as White Gladis, having gained a reputation for savaging yachts (**FT435:24**), has claimed another victim. On 31 October they carried out a sustained 45-minute assault on the *Grazie Mamma* – a mid-size sailing yacht owned by Polish cruise company Morskie Mile – smashing its rudder and holing the hull. Although the Moroccan Navy intervened, rescuing the crew and taking the yacht in tow, the vessel went down as it entered the port of Tanger-Med in Morocco, making it the fourth sunk by Gladis's pod. *livescience.com, 7 Mar, 18+29 Sept 2023.*

TIDY MOUSE

Retired postman Rodney Holbrook's curiosity was piqued when he repeatedly found that small items he had left on his shed workbench overnight had been tidied into a box by the next morning. Holbrook, 75, from Builth Wells, Powys, is an amateur wildlife photographer, so he set up a night vision camera trained on the bench. To his surprise, he filmed a mouse collecting clothes pegs, corks, nuts and bolts and piling them into the box, and found that the animal would do it repeatedly, every night.

"Ninety-nine times out of 100 the mouse will tidy up throughout the night," he said. "It is incredible really that they put them all back in the box. I think it's possible that they enjoy it… I don't bother to tidy up now, I leave things out of the box and they put it back in its place by the morning. I think he would tidy my wife away if I left her in there." Holbrook says, "It's been a bit of an experiment really. I've added different things to the desk to see if they can lift it," The mouse seems to have been happy to tidy almost anything and has even been caught stowing cable ties in the box. Holbrook has nicknamed the creature 'Welsh Tidy Mouse' and believes it is using the objects it collects to conceal nuts it has put in the box. This is not Holbrook's first encounter with a house-proud rodent; in 2019, while he was living in Bristol, he used a similar camera setup to help a friend spot another tidying mouse. "That one video went viral and reached people around the world," he said, "So I can't believe here in Builth Wells we have had the same thing happen years later." *BBC News, 7 Jan 2024.*

NO BODY THERE

The anatomy of sea stars, often known as starfish, has long been a puzzle to scientists. As they have five-fold symmetry and no obvious head or tail it has never been clear exactly which body parts they actually do have. It has long been suspected that they are headless, having lost their heads as they evolved into their current form. However, research at Stanford University has shown that they are, in fact, all head and no body. Scientists looking at the creatures' gene signatures during development found that those relating to head development were all present and active during their early growth stages, but the ones for the torso and tail were almost completely absent.

"It's as if the sea star is completely missing a trunk and is best described as just a head crawling along the seafloor," said study lead author Laurent Formery. "It's not at all what scientists have assumed about these animals." *earth.com, 1 Nov 2023.*

SIDELINES

NICHE

In Japan, company loyalty is still valued, and many people stay in posts that they hate as those who change jobs are often denigrated as "quitters". Now "taishoku daiko", or job-leaving agents, are springing up to advise people on how to leave unrewarding jobs with minimal hassle. They charge up to 29,800¥ (£163) to extract someone, including membership of a union to represent the employee in leaving negotiations. *<i>, 1 Jul 2023.*

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

US military staff at the Pentagon were found to have inadvertently sent millions of emails to a foreign government allied with Russia. American military email addresses end with the suffix ".mil" but many have been mistyped to leave out the "i", so the emails go to ".ml", the domain name for the west African country of Mali. *Gold Coast Bulletin (Aus), 18 Jul 2023.*

RUE ROMEO

After Maurizio Zanfanti, 63, died in 2018 while having sex with a 23-year-old woman, his mother Teresa Succi started a campaign to have a street in Rimini named after him. Zanfanti was known as the "Romeo of Rimini" because he claimed to have slept with more than 6,000 women and to have done more for the promotion of the area than 100 travel agencies. "My son deserves a street," his mum says. "Still today, I receive letters from girls from all over Europe dedicated to Maurizio." *<i>. 17 Aug 2023.*

EXPLODING TEDDY

A 38-year-old man in San Bernadino, California, drove into a store parking lot, took out a large teddy bear and watched as the toy began to smoke; it was then dramatically shredded in an explosion. This was too small to cause any damage to the surroundings, but it attracted police attention. When they caught up with the driver, they found he had firearms, more than 200 rounds of ammunition, over a kilo of meth, illegal fireworks, metal pipes used to make explosive devices, and a ballistic vest at his home, resulting in several charges, including "possession of a firearm by a felon and possession of a controlled substance for sale". *nbclosangeles.com, 17 Oct 2023.*

SIDELINES...

ANIMAL POWER

Technicians dealing with a power outage that cut off Sayreville, New Jersey, found the problem was a fish in the transformer. "We're guessing a bird dropped it," local police said, and later posted a tongue-in-cheek message on social media asking readers to remember the fish as "the victim in a senseless death" describing it as "a hard-working family man". Meanwhile, biologists at Boise State University, Idaho, researching bird deaths on power lines, found that rather than having been electrocuted, two-thirds of the birds found dead under the wires had actually been shot. *NY Times International Ed, 12 Aug 2023.*

COMPLETELY BANANAS

Iron Factory Ikeda in Hiroshima, Japan, a precision metal works, has a reputation for producing stunt items that go viral on social media. However, their banana hammer – a high quality steel banana that actually works as a hammer – was so popular that they have started manufacturing it for sale. They can now be bought online for 11,877 yen (£64), with a mini-version available for 3,287 yen (£18). Ikeda says the hammers will work in extreme conditions of up to 1,000 degrees and boasts of being the world's leading manufacturer of banana hammers, while making no secret of the fact that they are also the world's *only* manufacturer of banana hammers. *odditycentral.com, 27 Nov 2023*

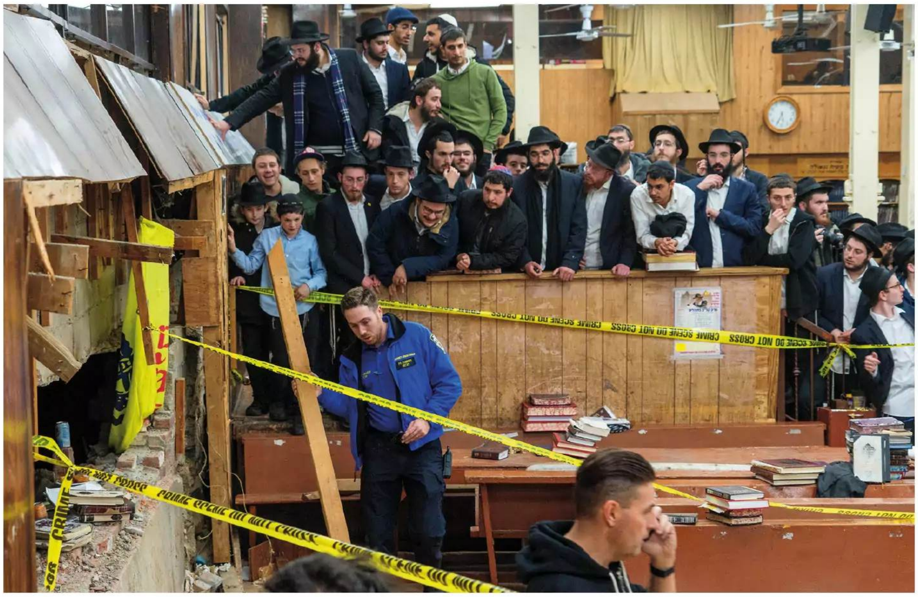
DOPE DISASTER

Already reeling from the effects of heat and floods on his crop of legally cultivated medical marijuana, the final straw came for Yiannis Bourounis when a flock of sheep broke into his greenhouse in Magnesia, Greece, and ate the remainder of his plants. They managed to chomp their way through 600lb (272kg) of vegetation, after which they were "jumping higher than goats" according to Bourounis. *upi.com, 25 Sept 2023.*

MARTIN ROSS

RELIGION NEWS

He's not the Messiah, but NYC tunnellers are very naughty boys...



ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Hasidic Jewish students look on as NYPD officers examine a breached wall and tunnel in the Brooklyn synagogue of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement. **BELOW**: Rabbi Schneerson, who died in 1994, is believed by one faction to be the Messiah.

BROOKLYN RABBI RIOT

In early January, the discovery of a secret tunnel being dug in the historic Chabad-Lubavitch world headquarters synagogue in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, triggered a major brawl between officers of the New York Police Department and orthodox Jewish students attempting to defend the tunnel. According to Motti Seligson, a spokesman for Chabad, a "group of extremist students" had covertly dug a tunnel under a row of office buildings and lecture halls to connect the synagogue to a nearby vacant building. On discovering the structure, the building manager called in a construction crew to fix the damage but, according to Seligson, "Those efforts were disrupted by the extremists, who broke through the wall to the synagogue, vandalising the sanctuary, in an effort to preserve their unauthorised access," resulting in the police being called. Once the students had been subdued and 10 arrested, the building was closed until inspectors could confirm it was structurally sound.

One faction of the group believes that Schneerson is the Messiah

MORDECAI BARON / CREATIVE COMMONS

It was not immediately obvious why the tunnel had been dug, prompting a slew of ugly antisemitic speculation, but it swiftly became clear that it was the result of a long-running internal feud within the Chabad-Lubavitch organisation. The Chabad-Lubavitch world headquarters was once the home of the community's revered leader Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who died in 1994. One faction of the group, known as "extreme Meshichists", believes Schneerson is the Messiah and is destined to return. A particular subgroup of these, students known as the "Tzfatim", have, since Schneerson's death, earned a reputation for creating disturbances and trying to take over the organisation. According to former community member David Lerner, tensions between the groups grew to the point where "there was screaming and shouting, sometimes physical altercations. I remember somebody's beard getting yanked, glasses being broken".

Eventually the Tzfatim managed to largely exclude the more moderate faction who own the building from their own synagogue, prompting a long-running lawsuit. They have, over the years, also increasingly behaved as if Schneerson is still alive, refusing to acknowledge any indications that he is dead. They have created more and more rituals that treat him as physically present and have dedicated themselves to carrying out his wishes to the letter, at least as they see them. This included expanding the synagogue, which continually suffered from overcrowding. The building ownership dispute

ABOVE: The weeping Virgin Mary statue in Chanal, Mexico, has been comforting the faithful in the troubled state of Colima.

and ensuing, still unresolved, legal battle prevented this happening, so it appears that the Tzfatim simply took the initiative and carried out a DIY expansion by creating the tunnel in the hope that it would trigger Shneerson's messianic return. “To them, it's plain,” says Yossi Newfield, a journalist familiar with Chabad-Lubavitch factionalism; according to him, they think: “‘By smashing down these walls, we'll force the end of the exile. We'll force the rebbe's return’”. *breakingnews.ie, 9 Jan; theguardian.com, 16 Jan 2024.*

WEEPING VIRGIN

Churchgoers in the strife-torn Mexican state of Colima, which saw more than 700 murders in 2023, have been comforted by a weeping statue of the Virgin at a church in the town of El Chanal. Videos on social media show the statue with tiny droplets apparently appearing in its eyes, then running down its face. Victor Ramos, a local resident, said: “Similarly, when we cry, and our eyes become red, the same happens to the image. So, a couple of tears started flowing. This is the event, the phenomenon that is happening here in the church.” He added, “We can associate it with… the violence rates that are being experienced here in the state of Colima, also here in the community.” Thousands of pilgrims have visited the church hoping to witness the miracle, but Professor Luigi Garlaschelli, a chemist from the University of Pavia in Italy, cast doubt on the phenomenon, despite not examining the statue, or indeed leaving Italy. He speculated as to the origin of the tears, saying “You need a hollow statue made of plaster or ceramic, which must be covered on the outside with a waterproof layer. By filling the statue with water through an imperceptible hole at the top, the porous material will absorb it, but the outer layer will prevent it from coming out. However, if a slight scratch is made in the protective glaze in the tear duct area, the absorbed water will come out through it as if it were tears.” It is expected that the recently established Pontifical Mariana International Academy, which describes itself as a scientific institution of the Holy See and is dedicated to investigating alleged miracles (**FT432:9, 435:19**), will examine the El Canal virgin and rule on its veracity. *dailystar.co.uk, 14 Nov 2023*

WITCH UNIVERSITY

Exeter University has launched an ‘innovative’ MA in Magic and Occult Science, starting in September 2024. Professor Emily Selove, the course leader, says it has been created due to a “recent surge in interest in magic”. It will give students the opportunity to study the impact of belief in witchcraft and magic on science and society around the world and will involve academics from numerous fields. Offered by the university's Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, the course, Selove says, “will allow people to re-examine the assumption that the West is the place of rationalism and science, while the rest of the world is a place of magic and superstition,” adding that “decolonisation, the exploration of alternative epistemologies, feminism and anti-racism are at the core of this programme.” Modules will include dragons in Western literature and art, the legend of King Arthur, palæography, Islamic thought, archæological theory and practice and the depiction of women in the Middle Ages, and the university is accepting applications from potential students now. *BBC News, 4 Oct 2023.*

JERUSALEM SYNDROME

In Jerusalem, a 40-year-old American tourist was detained for attacking and intentionally damaging two Roman sculptures in the Israel Museum. He toppled their pedestals, causing the ancient carvings to crash to the floor, and when questioned said he had done this because the sculptures were “idolatrous and contrary to the Torah” according to Israeli police. One sculpture was the only surviving part of a statue of Athena dating back to the second century, consisting of just the head and the neck; the other depicted a griffin with its front paw over the goddess Nemesis's wheel of fate. The Athena suffered some damage to its neck, but the griffin was smashed into fragments. Both sculptures have been moved to the museum's conservation lab for repair. The man's lawyer explained that his actions were the result of “Jerusalem syndrome”, a state of psychotic disorientation afflicting some pilgrims to Jerusalem that results in extreme religious behaviour, rather than being part of any fanatical agenda (see **FT118:21**). *hyperallergenic.com, 6 Oct 2023.*

SIDELINES...

MINE'S A PINT

Neuroscientist and robotics expert Seth Jackson from Bristol has created a robotic beer pump that you can use to pull a pint of beer by just thinking about it. The device, called “Homer”, uses electroencephalogram (EEG) technology to track brain patterns which guide the robot. “It reads your mind and measures your mental focus,” says Jackson. “If you're good at it, you pour the perfect pint; if you're bad at it you make a big frothy mess all over my robot.” *metro.co.uk, 19 Mar 2023.*

DUMMY RUN

A 22-year-old man in Warsaw, Poland, evaded security guards at a shopping mall by standing motionless in a clothes shop window, pretending to be a mannequin, until after closing time, when he sprang to life again and broke into jewellery shops in the centre to steal gems. However, he was spotted on CCTV and arrested before he could make his getaway. *D.Mail, 20 Oct 2023.*

RITUAL MASS CHILLING

Police descended en masse on the Seascape café in Chapel St Leonards, Lincolnshire, after a passer-by reported seeing a “ritual mass killing” taking place inside. They said they had seen bodies lying on the floor covered in blankets with someone in robes stepping over them. On arrival, officers found Millie Laws, 22, leading her Wednesday night meditation group. “It's very dark in there. I just had candles and tea lights lit,” said Laws, “It could look like everyone's dead because they are all really still, very nice and relaxed.” *D.Mail. 8 Sept 2023 .*

SPEEDER SHOCK

After he was caught doing 90mph in a 55mph speed limit, Connor Cato of Savannah, Georgia, was resigned to getting a “super speeder” ticket reserved for offenders going more than 35mph over the limit, which has a maximum fine of $1,000. When he got the fine notice though, he assumed there must be a typo, as it said he needed to pay $1.48 million or show up in court; but when he phoned to check, he was told, no, this was correct. However, on appearing in court, he was told the startling amount was “just a placeholder” generated by the software that produced automatic fine notices and that he was not expected to pay that much. *dailymail.co.uk, 16 Oct 2023.*

SIDELINES...

MOLOTOV COCKTAIL HOUR

Diners at the Caffe de Milano in Birmingham had to flee when a wall in the restaurant was engulfed in flames after a sparkler served in an extravagant cocktail set flammable decorations alight. Video shot by customers shows huge flames consuming the display, but fortunately no one was injured, and staff extinguished the blaze before emergency services arrived. *Metro.co.uk, 5 Feb 2023.*

INTOLLERABLE

Five men were arrested in Gujarat, India, for operating a fake toll plaza and collecting payment from drivers on the road between Morbi and Kutch. The accused are alleged to have leased factory premises close to the Vaghasiya toll plaza, then diverted traffic off the main highway and through the factory grounds so that the official toll was bypassed. They then levied their own charges on drivers using highly convincing fake toll booths. The fraudsters managed to run the scam for almost a year and a half before they were rumbled, pocketing thousands of rupees in the process. *financialexpress.com, 9 Dec 2023.*

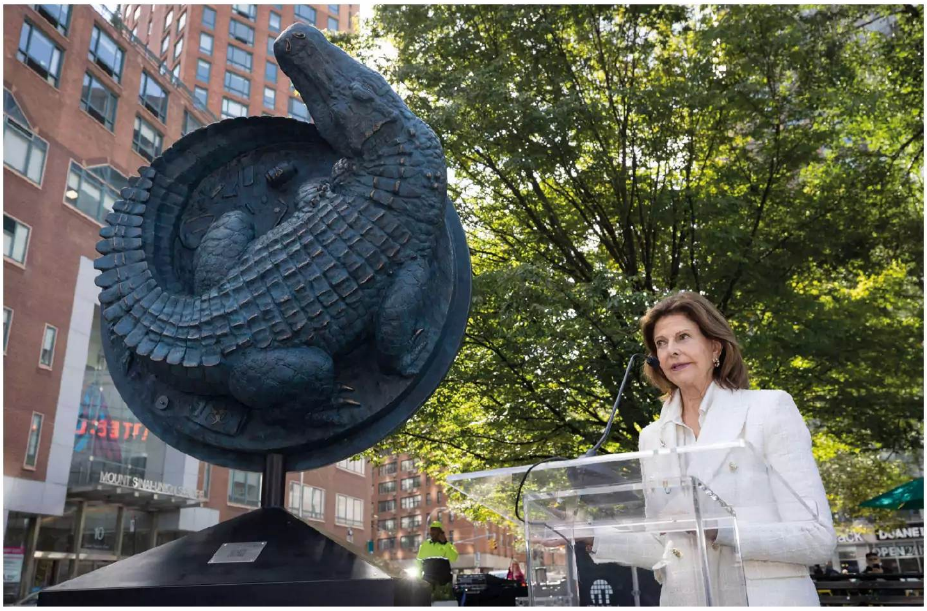
TOILET INFERNO

An unnamed man in Fujian province, China, had a lucky escape while using an electronically augmented "smart toilet". As he sat on the toilet, he noticed a smell of burning and when smoke began to billow from the bowl he leapt up, not even having time to pull up his trousers before it was engulfed in a furious blaze. This was the latest in a series of toilet infernos in China, where the increasingly popular augmented toilets, which offer functions like heated seats, bidet, night light and ambient music, have short-circuited and caught fire. *europeancleaning-journal.com, 13 Dec 2023.*

MARTIN ROSS

SEWER STORIES

A New York urban legend immortalised, plus fowl play in a Somerset sewer



TT NEWS AGENCY / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

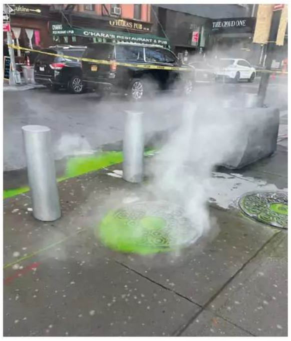
ABOVE: Sweden's Queen Silvia at the unveiling of Alexander Klingspor's sculpture "New York City Legend" in Union Square. **BELOW**: Green goo oozes from drains in Downtown Manhattan. **BOTTOM**: A very unusual blockage in a Somerset sewer.

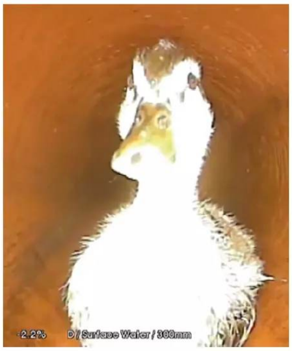
SEWERGATOR STATUE

One of New York's most enduring urban legends has been immortalised in bronze by Swedish artist Alexander Klingspor in a sculpture showing a life-size alligator wrapped round a manhole cover. "The theme of this piece is the legend of the alligator in the NYC sewer," said Klingspor. "I wanted to pay tribute to the city I love by depicting one of its most popular urban legends". His sculpture has been put on display in Union Square Park in Manhattan, where it was unveiled at a ceremony attended by Queen Silvia of Sweden on 18 October 2023. *editions.cnn.com, 22 Oct 2023.*

GOO GOO MUCK

Authorities in New York seemed to be taking a relaxed attitude to unidentified thick fluorescent green sludge oozing its way out of drains in Downtown Manhattan in early November. The Department of Environmental Protection directed enquiries to the power company Con Edison and the Port Authority, who both denied responsibility for the mystery goo. Diego, a 17-year-old local, said "Knowing New York, stuff happens. Weird stuff happens," while Shayla Johnson, from Texas said, "It's giving me, like, 'Ninja Turtle' vibes." Previous New York goo incidents had been written off as antifreeze and substances used to test sewer flows, although, it seems, without investigation. *businessinsider.com, 3 Nov 2023.*





CREEPY BLOCKAGE

Wessex Water staff tackling a blocked toilet in Bristol eventually managed to pull the offending object from the pipe after attempts to dislodge it with rods and jetting equipment failed. It turned out that the blockage was caused by a mangled doll's head which emerged from the sewer crusted in a nightmare hairdo of flushed wet wipes, much to the consternation of sewage workers. *<i> 31 Oct 2023.*

TOILET DUCK

Engineers investigating a sewer blockage in Frenchay, Somerset, sent a robotic camera down the pipe to identify the obstruction. They were not, however, expecting what they found; the pipe contained a live duck that walked up to the camera and pecked it. The bird was safely retrieved by the survey team, who said: "We come across a variety of blockages… but this was one of the more unusual ones." *D. Express, 25 Aug 2023.*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

294: BAWD GAMES

(For amplification, see Allison Glazebrook & Barbara Tsakirgis (eds.), *Houses of Ill-Repute: The Archæology of Brothels, Houses, and Taverns in the Greek World*, Univ. Penn. Press, 2016); also Paul Chrystal, *In Bed with the Ancient Greeks*, Amberley Publishing, 2016).

Reviewing *The Outcast Manufacturers*, Theodore Dreiser observed: "Fort was never interested in sex... a little more sex and this book might have been popular."

Enter The Animals: "There is a house in New Orleans / They call the Rising Sun. / It's been the ruin of many a poor boy, / And, God, I know, I'm one."

One Roman youth may have carried Burdon's burden. He was congratulated (Horace, *Satires* 1. 2. 30-5) by Cato the Censor for using brothels rather than fucking married women. However, when he realised the youth's frequent visits, the follow-up was "I told you to visit, not live there." Horace prefaces this anecdote with the remark that quite some Romans' erotic priority was "a stinking stew".

An online piece by Annalee Newitz invites you to visit a 2,000-year-old Greek brothel. This refers to a 1997 discovery in Thessalonica of a unified bath-house, hall, and taverna, the hall being packed with erotic illustrations and sex toys (long before Ann Summers) – full description by Yannis Stavrakakis, *Archeology* 51, 1997.

A number of Greek houses, including the so-called 'Building Z' in Athens, are likewise sex-crammed. Clare Kelly Blazeby (Leeds University – see online interview and cognate websites) insists these are proof that Greeks would rent out their houses as private brothels. Many disagree, and this may be a bit far-fetched, it being just as likely that these house-owners simply held private sex-parties for themselves and friends. Either way, I am reminded of 'Madam Cyn', England's own famous madam, Cynthia Payne, cinematically depicted by Julie Walters in *Personal Services* (1987). Also of a long-ago newspaper report of the police raiding a similar establishment and finding top churchmen contently enjoying Earl Grey Tea and poached eggs.

Solon ('Father of Democracy') inaugurated legal brothels in Athens, anticipating Cato's argument that they cut down on adultery. A poetic fragment of Philemon commends him thus (abbreviated): *The women stand naked so you won't be deceived. Look them over. Maybe you're not feeling well, in some pain? Hop in. Only an obol. No coy behaviour or talk. Do what you want with your choice. As you leave, tell her to go to hell, what's she to you?*

One obol wasn't dear. It may have been standard price for standard services. More specialised tastes may have been charged extra. Solon levied taxes on his brothels to finance public works – cash-strapped modern governments might consider this simple form of revenue-raising.

Aristophanes's famous sex-strike play *Lysistrata* (tactic imitated by some Oxford undergraduates in Anti-Vietnam War protests) shows the limit of Athenian sisterhood – the brothels stayed open for business.

There were also male brothels. Plato's later disciple, the handsome prisoner-of-war Phædo, was sold into one, being later ransomed. He is said to have closed his cubicle door and engaged clients in philosophical discussions – wouldn't always be welcome in a Soho establishment.

A bionic chronological leap catapults us into the 18th century world of 'Molly Houses', operated by the likes of 'Miss Muff' and 'Mother Clap'. Contemporary newspapers luridly described their police raids (1726/1728). Inmates sported such *noms de guerre* as 'Plump Nelly', 'Susan Guzzle', 'Princess Seraphina', and many more. Some lexicographers trace the arty-homosexual idiolect 'Polari' back to this period. If true, we might here 'Vada the Eeks' of Round the Horne's Julian and Sandy.

A building census credits Rome (pop. c. one million+) with 45 brothels. Pompeii (c. 25.000) has 35. What this says about these cities' inhabitants I do not know. Rome's brothels were supervised by the ædiles (junior officials), who tried to placate Cato's ghost by forbidding them to open before (in our terms) 3pm. Doubtless, this by-law was honoured more in the breach than the observance.

Pompeii's biggest stew is the 'Great Lupanar', this term deriving from *lupa*, one of many Roman slang words for tarts. Livy knew a story that the suckling she-wolf of Romulus and Remus was actually an ancient equivalent of the Hickory Holler's Tramp.

Furnishings were basic, mattresses on stone platforms. Didn't put off all punters, though. One of the concomitant 134 inscriptions reads "Here I fucked many girls". Another, "You fuck well", would be the typical girl's flattery intended to get an extra tip. The terse "Thrust Hard" may count as an erotic instructional graffito.

Of the girls, we have Euplia (Greek for 'Fair Voyage') recalling "being here with 2,000 men", while others offer fellation at 5 asses, 'Greek Love' (Anal), and so on – ancestors of cards in London newsagents' windows and telephone kiosks. Incidentally, when we visited Pompeii in the 1960s, ladies were denied entrance to the Lupanar, being forced to trail off disappointedly to examine the kitchens instead.

Petronius's *Satyricon* (ch6) offers an inside glance, his narrator reporting: "I saw naked girls tip-toeing between price-cards". Euplia's impressive tally connects with Claudius's wife Messalina, noted (by Juvenal and Pliny) to have defeated Rome's leading prostitute in a shagging contest in "a stinking whorehouse" (score: 25 in 24 hours), also for running a brothel in the palace. In this, she had been anticipated by (who else?) Caligula who ran a bisexual one to raise money. In the Party to End All Parties thrown for Nero by prætorian prefect Tigellinus (Tacitus, *Annals* bk15 ch37), the latter provided pop-up brothels staffed by society women, competition provided by freelance naked professionals.

Piquantly, later, Tigellinus, now under orders to commit suicide, according to Tacitus (*Histories* bk1 ch72) and Plutarch (*Otho* ch2), "In an atmosphere of lechery, amongst the vilest harlots," he slit his throat with a razor – forget the razor and there are worse ways to go....

Talking of health, the extent to which STDs affected the ancient world is much disputed. The only literary pointer seems to be one of the Younger Pliny's *Letters* (bk6 no. 24) with its mention of a man afflicted with genital tumours.

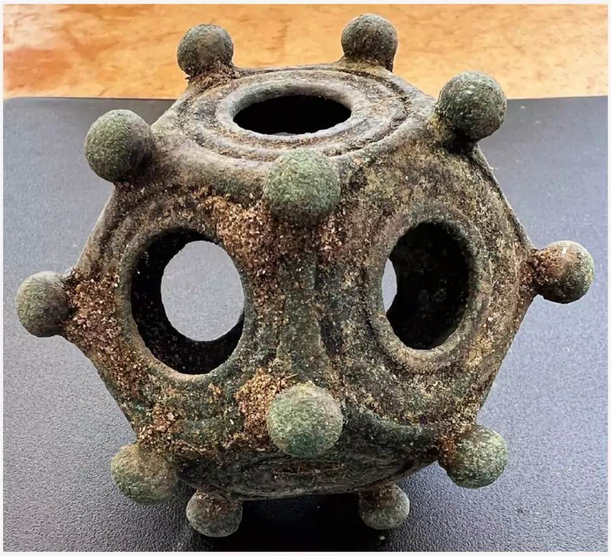
Little space for brothels in Christian Byzantium, save to say hagiographies of saints frequently praise their heroic resistance to carnal temptations, and mention empress Theodora who, after a hyper-hectic sexual youth (lurid details in Procopius's *Secret History*, plus the silky irony of Gibbon) closed the brothels and confined the girls to a cliff-top 'Convent of Repentance' from which many frustrated ladies flung themselves in suicidal leaps.

And *no*, researching this column did not involve a visit to Nevada's 'Chicken Ranch'...

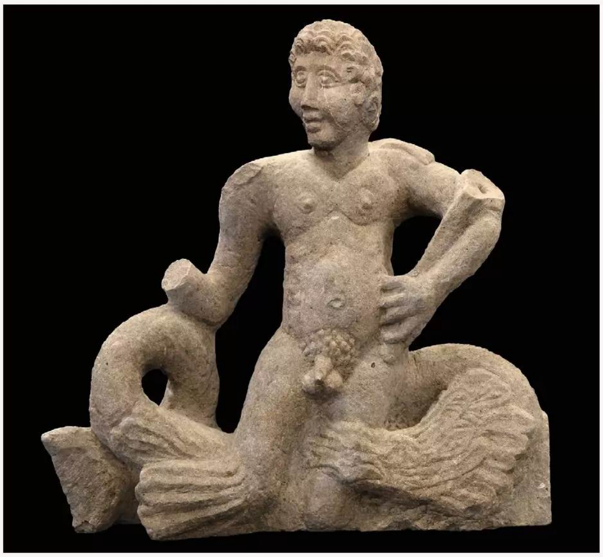
ARCHÆOLOGY

A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL SIEVEKING puzzles over some mysterious ancient objects and a long-lost language



NORTON DISNEY HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY GROUP.



CANTERBURY ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

ABOVE LEFT: The mysterious Roman dodecahedron seen shortly after its discovery at Norton Disney near Lincoln. **ABOVE RIGHT**: A Roman stone statue of Triton riding on a sea monster unearthed in Teynham in Kent. **BELOW**: An Anglo-Saxon object found by a metal detectorist in Langham, Norfolk – but what is it?

MYSTERY OBJECT

Last year, an excavation by a community archæology group at Norton Disney near Lincoln, close to the Fosse Way and about 2,300ft (700m) from the site of a Roman villa discovered in 1933, unearthed a dodecahedron in a pit filled with Roman pottery and rubble. The find featured on BBC2's *Digging for Britain* on 9 January 2024. Theories around these objects' purpose range from surveying devices to candle-holders, tools for wool crafts or the heads of weapons or sceptres; but the inconsistency in their sizes and a lack of wear on most examples makes these functions unlikely. Given the skill and complex techniques needed to produce them, some have suggested that they were showpieces intended to demonstrate metalworkers' abilities. Confronted by mystery objects, archæologists often fall back on a ritual or religious explanation.

To date, about 130 such dodecahedra (hollow 12-sided artefacts) have been documented since the 18th century. They were discovered across what was the north-western edge of the Roman empire, mostly in the provinces of Britannia, Gaul, and Germania. They have never been found in Italy, nor are they mentioned in Roman literature. Thirty-three of these objects have been discovered in Britain – one, unearthed in Newcastle in the 1970s, is now on display at the Corbridge Roman Town Museum, alongside two others from sites along Hadrian's Wall. The dodecahedra range in size from that of a golf ball to a cricket ball and are all unique in weight and dimensions. They have holes of different sizes in each face and studs at each corner. Smaller dodecahedra in gold, with similar holes and studs, have been found in southeast Asia. It is not known whether there is any link with the European ones, although the region was connected to the Roman Empire via trade routes. The Norton Disney example weighs 250g (8.8oz) and is 8cm (3in) wide. It's about 67 per cent copper, 7 per cent tin, and 26 per cent lead. Very close by, in 1989, another copper alloy object, a figure of Mars as a horseman, was found and is now in the British Museum. *historyfirst.com, Newcastle University Press Office, Newark Advertiser, 9 Jan 2024.*

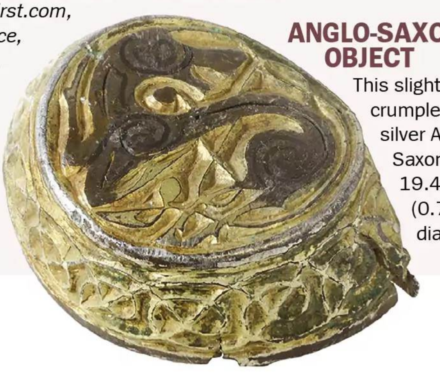
> Theories around these objects' purpose range from surveying devices to candle-holders or the heads of sceptres

TRITON STATUE

Archæologists excavating a site near the A2 London Road (which follows the ancient Roman Watling Street) in Teynham, Kent, beginning last May, have unearthed a Roman stone statue depicting Triton – a merman with the torso of a man and the tail of a fish – riding on a sea monster. It was found ritually placed within a disused clay-lined water tank, along with burnt fill-material, only 1.3ft (40cm) below ground. The head was broken off. Triton was the son of Poseidon/Neptune, the god of the sea. The statue dates from between the late first century and second century AD. It is about 70cm (27.5in) tall and weighs more than 60kg (132lb).

Dr Richard Hobbs, Senior Curator of Roman Britain at the British Museum, said: "This is a really stunning piece of sculpture, undoubtedly of great significance to our understanding of Roman Britain and its place in the wider Roman Empire. Although a few other fragments of similar sculptures are known from Roman Britain, nothing quite like this has been discovered before."

The excavations have also uncovered the remains of a mausoleum set in a walled enclosure. Several Roman and possibly later burials have been identified. *D.Mail, 14 Sept 2023.*



ANGLO-SAXON OBJECT

This slightly crumpled, gilded silver Anglo-Saxon artefact, 19.4mm (0.7in) in diameter, was found by a metal detectorist near Langham, Norfolk. Similar objects have been found before, but no one knows what they were used for. The object has a flat, circular top and short, straight sides forming a shallow, hollow cylinder. Dating to the late eighth or early ninth century, it was also "completely unlike" any of the other similar mystery objects discovered by detectorists, said Dr Helen Geake, Norfolk's finds liaison officer. "On the sides is a spiral pattern recognisable from the *Book of Kells* or Lindisfarne Gospel," she said. "It has got a backward-looking animal – possibly a horse – that fills the space nicely and I love its colour."

Its creator would have mixed mercury, imported from Spain, with powdered gold to highlight the animal within the design. Whatever it was used for – and one possibility could be it was intended for the end of a staff, which has long since rotted away – a great deal of highly skilled work went into its creation. Dr Geake said: "It's a mysterious object and you can't say what kind of thing it's off at all. But it was made by someone with a real eye for loveliness." The find was declared treasure by a coroner and Norwich Castle Museum hopes to acquire it. *BBC News, 31 Dec 2023.*

ROMAN PERFUME

The tomb of a wealthy family excavated in the Roman city of Carmo, today's Carmona, near Seville in Spain has unearthed a quartz bottle alongside six urns. The bottle had a dolomite stopper sealed with bitumen, which kept its solidified contents perfectly preserved. Analysis showed the base of the scent was vegetable oil – probably olive – with a top note of musky patchouli. The essential oil is used in modern perfumes, and was a favourite with hippies back in the Sixties/Seventies. Its use 2,000 years ago was unknown until this discovery. *D.Express, 5 June 2023.*

ROMAN SHRINE IN LEICESTER

Ancient rumours that Leicester Cathedral was built on the site of a Roman temple have been confirmed by the discovery of a Roman shrine beneath the structure, which may have been used by worshippers of a fertility or mystery cult. The small painted chamber, measuring 13ft square (4.4x4.5m), contained an altar stone where sacrifices to gods may have taken place. Lying face down and broken amid the rubble was the base of the altar stone, carved from local Dane Hills sandstone and measuring about 10in by 6in (25x15cm) with decorative mouldings. No evidence of an inscription survived on the altar. It is thought the room was a private place of worship of either a family, or a cult room where a small group would meet to worship gods such as Mithras, Cybele, Bacchus or Dionysus. The sunken room was probably built in the second century, when Leicester was the Roman town Ratæ Corieltavorum. It was dismantled and in-filled, probably in the late third or early fourth century. *D.Telegraph, 8 Mar 2023.*

ABOVE: The Lion Gate at the southwest of the city of Hattusa, capital of the Hittite Empire. A newly discovered and untranslated clay tablet found nearby seems to be a long-lost language from more than 3,000 years ago.

BERNARD GAGNON / CREATIVE COMMONS

NEWLY DISCOVERED LANGUAGE

An untranslated text has been discovered in Turkey, scattered among tens of thousands of ancient clay tablets, which were written in the time of the Hittite Empire during the second millennium BC. The curious cuneiform script seems to be a long-lost language from more than 3,000 years ago. It is unlike any other ancient written language found in the Middle East, although it seems to share roots with other Anatolian-Indo-European languages. The text starts at the end of a cultic ritual text written in Hittite – the oldest known Indo-European tongue – after an introduction that essentially translates to: "From now on, read in the language of the country of Kalašma" (or Kalash). Kalašma is referencing an organised Bronze Age society, located at the northwest fringe of the much larger Hittite Empire in ancient Anatolia – some distance from the capital city of Hattusa, where this clay tablet was unearthed.

Andreas Schachner, head of Hattusa Ruins Archaeological Excavations, noticed that the clay tablet was remarkably "uneroded" compared to more than 25,000 others found at the same site in what is now Bogazköy. For over a century, scholars have been working to uncover and translate Hattusa's archive of royal treaties, political correspondences, and legal and religious texts. While most of these tablets were written in Hittite cuneiform, experts have found other languages. These scripts seem to come from various ethnic groups that once lay in the shadow of the Hittite Empire, during its rule across much of Anatolia from 1650 to 1200 BC.

The Hittites were uniquely interested in recording rituals in foreign languages, not simply for scholarly reasons. The Hittite Empire seems to have celebrated thousands of gods and goddesses. As Hittites conquered more and more land, historians suspect the Empire acquired new religions as a way of bringing fresh subjects into the fold. The archives of Hattusa mention deities worshipped as far away as Syria and Mesopotamia. Borrowing ideas, like cuneiform writing systems, traditions, and religions was probably a way to expand the Empire's reach. Kalašmans, for instance, ended up fighting for the Hittites against the Egyptian Empire in 1274 BC. Currently, there are no available photos of the newly discovered tablet with Kalašmaic writings, as experts are still working out how to translate it. *sciencealert.com, 15 Nov; thedebrief.org, 20 Nov 2023.*

ANCIENT PORRIDGE

Analysis of cooking pots in the Outer Hebrides suggests that Scots have been eating porridge for 3,000 years longer than previously thought. Traces of wheat and milk have been found on pottery dating back to between 3600 and 3300 BC on the Isle of Lewis. Dr Lucy Cramp, co-author of the study, said it may be the earliest example of porridge being eaten in the form we recognise today. Larger pots were used for meat-based dishes. *D.Telegraph, Shropshire Star, 7 Sept 2022.*

Crown and spectre

ALAN MURDIE catches up on a recent pub haunting and its sensational coverage in the press

MEN MEDIA

ABOVE: Nigel Ramsay, the landlord of the Crown Inn, Lower Peover, Cheshire, is reportedly “living in fear” after a spate of odd incidents at his pub. **BELOW**: The grave of the tragic Maria Rathbone.

With various circumstances preventing me from scrutinising new reports of ghosts and hauntings during the latter part of 2023 as closely as I would wish, by the start of this year I had accumulated quite a pile to review and reflect upon. Now following an extensive perusal in early January, I am pleased to report no decline in fresh ghost reports, with the last six months providing numerous interesting cases ranging from the routine to the downright eerie and disturbing.

Among stand-out cases is one from Cheshire headlined “Petrified landlord of ‘haunted’ village pub reckons ghost is ‘out to get him’”. This story was carried online for chesterchronicle.co.uk (26 Nov 2023) and also featured in several national daily newspapers.

Nigel Ramsay, 59, the licensee of the Crown Inn at Lower Peover, reports being left “fearing for his life” after experiencing a series of spooky, unexplained happenings. He wrote: “I took over the pub in March this year [2023], and in the first week I was in the back cellar and was closing the door on a Friday night and an iron bar fell down off a hook and hit me in the centre of the forehead.

“It caused me to have a bleed on the brain. I thought it was maybe just an accident at the time, but that was the start of the events.”

“I was in the back cellar and was closing the door and an iron bar fell down and hit me in the centre of the forehead”

A host of ‘unexplained’ happenings followed over the next few months, as he confirms, for “since then we’ve seen regular glasses fly off onto the floor, the TV remote swept right across. We hear ‘shh, shh’ noises when we go through doors” and “we see glasses swinging on their own for no apparent reason.” A stool also collapsed beneath him when he stood on it and chairs have moved around on their own.

Now much of this – save for the initial accident – is routine pub-haunting stuff, matching numerous instances recorded elsewhere across decades, so frequent and predictable that cases even start becoming rather tiresome for some researchers. However, the *Daily Star* (21 Nov 2023) gave matters an even more dramatic spin, accusing the ghost of responsibility for the initial accident with the headline, “Pub landlord ‘living in fear’ as ghost caused a ‘bleed on the brain’”.

It seems matters were then further sensationalised and even potentially aggravated, at least in terms of perceptions, by the arrival of a Cheshire medium named Deborah Davies, who volunteered her advice and services. Previously a participant and star in the TV show *Real Housewives of Cheshire*, Deborah is now known in some circles as the ‘Ghost Whisperer’. Accompanied by psychic Linzi Steer from ‘Ghosts of Britain’, she broadcast her investigation at the Crown live on Facebook, with the results fuelling Nigel’s concerns.

Concurrently, Nigel himself was busy researching village history, seeking an explanation for the phenomena afflicting him. He uncovered a grim local tragedy of how “… a young girl named Maria Rathbone died here in December 1821, sent to the shop in the frozen winter and got lost, and no one would let her in”.

“She was found dead 400 yards from here still with bacon under her arm”, allegedly discovered after a gentleman dreamed she would be found beneath a holly bush. An inquest and wake for Mary then allegedly took place at the Crown, the coroner's verdict being that she froze to death.

Now just how much of this information Nigel then went on to share is unclear, but the verdict of misadventure or accidental death is now challenged by Deborah, who contends her recordings at the Crown demonstrate the ghost is revealing Mary was murdered, a claim established by what Deborah calls the "most chilling EVP [electronic voice phenomenon] that I have ever heard in my entire life". Worse still, Deborah maintains the "nasty" ghost of the putative murderer stalks the pub, rated by her as "the most frightening ghost" she's ever heard of.

And if that wasn't disturbing enough for the landlord, Deborah duly telephoned him with the advice, "Nigel, do not be on your own," since she considers the premises now contain a population totalling at least 11 different ghostly entities! Meanwhile, videos of her investigations have gone viral, with Deborah assuring her devotees on Facebook she is conducting some "remote work" to remove these "nasty" ghosts.

At this point, one may usefully step back and observe that perhaps a less spiritually loaded perspective should be applied to this fraught situation.

Now I am not trying to dismiss what could be a perfectly genuine case, but merely to raise some reservations and point out the information obtained here, whether gleaned from historic records or alleged psychic impressions, is far from sufficient to draw such firm conclusions.

I am quite able to countenance that Nigel Ramsay may have witnessed some genuinely odd incidents in the aftermath of his head injury (examples are recorded of people apparently gaining increased awareness after brain trauma); but so far there appears to be no corroboration or verification of any of the claims of the expanding ghostly population at the Crown, which all emanate from Deborah.

It may well be the Crown merits some re-investigation, but a host of questions need addressing before definite conclusions can be reached. Have any apparitions been seen? Has anyone else witnessed anything at all? Just why should the girl or the postulated killer (if he ever existed) be showing up now at the building and not the site of the (alleged) killing? And from where have the other nine or 10 alleged entities all descended?

LEFT: Medium Deborah Davies believes that the Crown Inn is home to "the most frightening ghost" she has ever head of.

EBORAH DAVIES PSYCHIC MEDIUM / FACEBOOK

It is a trite point that EVP recordings bestow insufficient grounds for setting aside any coroner's inquest, no matter how unjust a verdict might appear in today's eyes. Regrettably, the extensive and intensive study of EVP recordings over the last half-century has failed to convincingly establish whether any genuine effect exists at all. And just how reliable are Ms Davies's psychic talents, and is there any independent validation of them under test conditions?

Furthermore, while Deborah may be wholly sincere in her pronouncements, my concern is that her claims may have inadvertently increased the anxiety level of the landlord at the Crown all the more.

The fact is once a person has witnessed an apparently paranormal event that defies or refutes common experience or deeply held convictions, the critical faculties may dissolve and leave a shaken witness vulnerable. In such a state a witness may be prone to accepting any claim or explanation, no matter how unlikely or far-fetched, and notwithstanding that it is unsupported by any evidence.

Jacques Vallée gives the example of an observer who sees a spoon bent, apparently paranormally, by a psychic. If the psychic then states a spirit or an alien provides the power to warp metal, the witness is far more prone to accept this explanation. Having already experienced their worldview being shaken by the apparently impossible spoon-bending, the dismayed and disoriented formerly sceptical observer may now be at risk of swallowing almost any absurdity as true. Yet they have only seen the spoon bend – there is actually no evidence to prove whether the associated claim is true.

In this case, Nigel says events at the Crown have shaken him to the core. He said: "I'm a Roman Catholic, Christian – I go to church every week, so I didn't believe in this sort of thing at all, it's not my thing, but the investigation really changed my opinion on things. Before the investigation I thought it was a bit of fun. I've never physically seen a ghost, but ask me now and, yeah, I'm kind of scared."

Possibly such a feeling might have been avoided if a more balanced, better-informed and nuanced approach were taken. The welfare of the household within a ghost-shattered home ought to be at the forefront of any investigation, yet it is ironic how some claiming to be 'sensitives' appear to lack tact and sensitivity when talking to witnesses, sometimes implanting the most upsetting notions within their minds.

Great sensitivity is indeed required in responding to distress calls from occupiers of haunted properties to avoid magnifying anxieties. I am afraid to say that some investigators, and psychics, gripped by their own favoured notions for explaining events or their professed gifts, may easily run away with themselves.

The universal law of competency applies to paranormal investigators, clairvoyants, mediums and psychics, just as much as it does in other walks of life. There are some very good ones, some average ones and some bad ones. Which is just the same as you will find with every other trade profession or business, be it teaching, medicine, accountancy, the law, politics, journalism or whatever.

Some psychics may improve the calm and well-being of a stressed household, some have no effect and some end up making everything far worse in creating an even more volatile and tense situation. Again, this is a dynamic not confined to psychic matters; even mainstream science and psychology acknowledge 'experimenter effects' and impacts, positive and negative, upon subjects.

As I wrote in a previous column, fears in already stressed households "...may easily be compounded by irresponsible, thoughtless and often downright idiotic pronouncements rashly uttered by outsiders. Careless remarks may succeed in aggravating fears to the extent that some hapless residents become gripped by the notion 'that any interference will only anger it' – whatever 'it' is."

Sometimes fears over a haunting may be entirely self-induced. Witnesses can conflate perfectly normal incidents at a property or uncritically believe what is no more than alarming gossip or folklore. Alternatively, individuals can scare themselves silly by recklessly playing with Ouija boards or dabbling in divination. Such involvement can adversely play on the mind of a susceptible person, even if the messages received are gibberish.

Anyone investigating events at the Crown might reflect on two older haunted pub cases before setting off.

The Three Tuns Inn at Bungay in Suffolk was once feted as 'Britain's most haunted pub' (**FT440:35**). In 1969, sources claimed it boasted at least two dozen "earth-bound entities", identified during séances by a psychically inclined landlady using an improvised Ouija board with a tumbler as pointer. One spirit coming through was 'Tom Hardy', an 18th century highwayman who used the inn as a base before being executed with his gang. Another ghost was supposedly a hapless 18-year-old youth called 'Rex Bacon' from the 17th century.

A complicated story of lust, adultery and homicide emerged, ending with Rex hanging himself at The Three Tuns in 1682 after killing his wife's lover. During one séance, a Mr Beckett, a local hairdresser, claimed he saw a white ghost-like figure in a corner of one of the rooms where he later discovered a door was once situated.

Church of England exorcist Canon Pearce Higgins became involved, treating the communications as initially worthy of serious consideration. This alleged multiple haunting was duly mentioned in Jack Hallam's *The Haunted Inns of England* (1972).

Yet investigations undertaken in 1970 by the Norfolk and Norwich Record Office in response to the ghostly messages found no confirmation of the claimed executions of the highwaymen (*Eastern Daily Press*, 25 April 1970). Christopher Reeve, author of *Paranormal Suffolk* (2009), reviewed the evidence and searched local records, but could not find any names that matched locally, other than that at nearby Mettingham there was once a vicar named Bacon. Those who consider the outpourings of Ouija boards may often reflect the contents of the subconscious mind might well wonder if the messages were telling us more about repressed feelings and fantasies of the sitters involved rather than any spirits…

A second instructive case arose two years later with an allegedly cursed pub "sited practically on the river Lynn" at Lyme Regis, Dorset, and likely only to have involved auto-suggestion caused by gossip and expectation. It was investigated by Andrew Green (1927-2004) and mentioned in his *Ghost Hunting: A Practical Guide* (1973).

NICK MACNEILL / GEOGRAPH

ABOVE: The Three Tuns in Bungay, Suffolk, supposedly boasted at least two dozen ghosts.

The Three Tuns in Bungay was once feted as 'Britain's most haunted pub'

The pub (unnamed by Green at the time) was reputedly haunted by a former owner, a woman dressed like Queen Victoria who gave up the licence in 1927, forced to leave by her alcoholic daughter drinking away the profits. Before leaving this formidable landlady stated to all and sundry that "no-one will ever do as well as I did".

All licensees thereafter allegedly suffered in some way, with the supposed 'curse' confirmed by incidents between 1928-1972. These included "the breaking-up of two happy marriages, the absconding by a landlord with the Christmas club funds, and later the sudden death of a landlord", according to a local retailer offered the pub but who refused it, "because of its history". Green recorded "….[He] told me he had seen the phantom of the old lady," but was reluctant to provide further details, for it might recall this frightening incident more vividly, as well as another occasion when he was scared by something, "which came out of a cupboard."

Studying this limited information in the cold light of reason, Green concluded there was really very little evidence of any haunting or curse, and preferred sociology to synchronicity as the explanation.

The pub is almost certainly the Rock Point Inn (formerly the Rock Hotel) at Lyme Regis. Regarding the witnessing of the phantom, Green found the man in question was familiar with the story of the woman for many years, having worked with his father at the pub, and thought the "thing in the cupboard" might have been a pet animal accidentally shut inside.

A mixture of landlords and deaths over 45 years might reasonably be expected, with the instances cited not in any way out of the ordinary. Health and safety is an especially important consideration at any pub, since all kinds of accidents might conceivably occur from wholly normal causation, a possibility to be remembered when assessing events at the Crown in Cheshire.

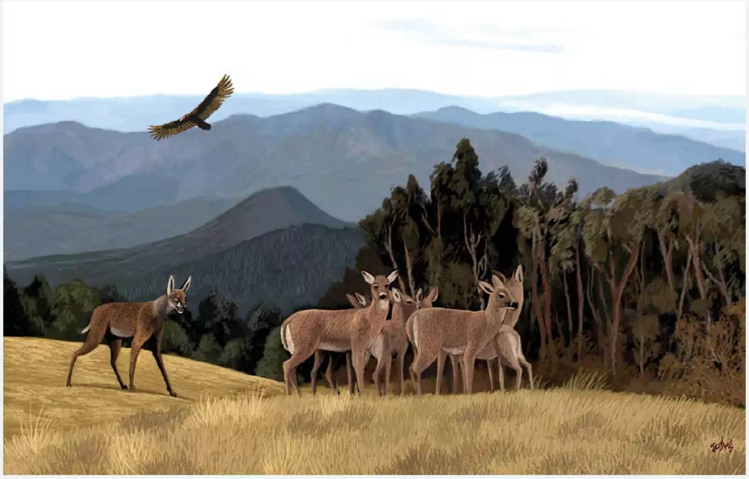
Fortunately, there is a positive side discernible: all the publicity has resulted in numerous people messaging Nigel Ramsay at the Crown asking if they can visit to see the ghosts. "We don't have rooms, but we serve up food every night of the week for guests wanting to come and join us," he says. So perhaps by the time you read this, the manifestations may have dwindled or even ceased entirely, with a happier state of affairs prevailing.

In my next column I shall be reviewing some of the other intriguing reports arising over recent months, indicating that ghosts remain as active as ever…

ALIEN ZOO NEWS FROM THE CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL GARDEN

KARL SHUKER shares some new information about Mexican mystery cats

PAINTINGS BY HODARI NUNDO

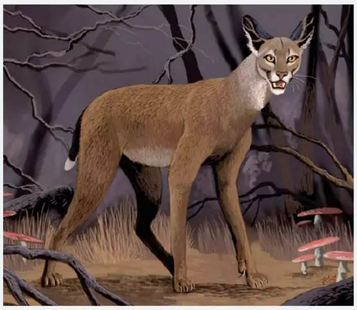


MEXICO'S MYSTIFYING MAZAMIZTLI

Cryptozoologically speaking, Mexico is already known for two controversial cat forms. One is the *onza*, which, depending upon the precise specimen or report under consideration, may (or may not) be merely a distinctively gracile form of puma (I've discussed this subject in detail within my three mystery cat books). The second is the ruffed cat, a name I gave to it due to the sizeable ruff of fur encircling its neck and known (briefly) from some pelts obtained by Ivan T Sanderson before they were apparently destroyed in a flood.

On 22 January 2024, however, I learnt of a third Mexican feline cryptid, via some fascinating details posted on his Facebook page that day and the following one by Mexican artist and crypto-enthusiast Hodari Nundu. Hodari noted that in his 1570s magnum opus *Historia Natural de la Nueva España*, dealing with the wildlife of what is nowadays Mexico, Spanish naturalist Francisco Hernández de Toledo wrote about an intriguing, unidentified beast referred to locally as the *mazamiztli*. This name is a combination of two others, both of Nahuatl (imperial Aztec) origin – *maza* ('deer') and *miztli* ('puma').

Hernández stated that it was called by this compound name due to its combining various deer traits and puma traits, but unfortunately he did not elaborate further. However, a second author, the 16th-century Franciscan missionary priest and Aztec scholar Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, did provide additional details. He stated that the *mazamiztli* is the size and colour of deer, and also possesses paws and (in males) antlers like deer, but it sports the very sharp claws and fangs of a puma, and it does not eat grass like deer. Instead, it walks among deer and when hungry it seizes one of these unsuspecting creatures, disembowels it with its claws, and eats its entrails. Apparently, the *mazamiztli* looks so similar to real deer that it can only be distinguished by them via its foul smell (so presumably it hunts downwind of them to conceal its scent?).



Recalling that the *onza* is itself supposedly gracile like deer, might this cat and the *mazamiztli* simply be one and the same? However, the *onza* has its own, separate Nahuatl name – *cuitlamiztli* ('wolf-puma'). Having said that, the *mazamiztli* sounds irresistibly like a feline version of the South American maned wolf *Chrysocyon brachyurus*, whose very elongate limbs and extra-large ears make it look remarkably deer-like in superficial appearance. Consequently, I have wondered if what we are dealing with here is a sexually dimorphic feline species, i.e. with the *onza* aka *cuitlamiztli* conceivably being one sex of this species and the *mazamiztli* being the other, visibly different sex. Certainly, males are often noticeably larger or burlier than females in a number of different cat species.

However, Fr Bernardino's inclusion of antlers as a male *mazamiztli* characteristic argues against this creature being real rather than folkloric. It would be very interesting if more information regarding this Mexican mystery beast is unearthed in the future. Meanwhile, by kind permission of Hodari, here are his superb paintings of the *mazamiztli*, as reconstructed by him from the two Spanish reports noted here.

Hodari Nundu, posts on his personal Facebook page, 22 + 23 Jan 2024.

LEONCILLO – A FOURTH MEXICAN MYSTERY CAT!

And as if three Mexican mystery cats were not enough, I also received in January 2024 some information concerning a potential fourth one! It took the form of a short account posted beneath my ShukerNature blog article on the *onza* by a reader based in Mexico. The reader did not reveal their name, but affirmed their long fascination regarding the *onza* and then provided some thought-provoking information concerning not only this cat but also a smaller, separate feline form that they termed the *leoncillo*. The older members of the reader's Jalisco-inhabiting family have spoken about this animal, which they liken to a diminutive lion with a small mane. The reader showed their uncle a picture of an Asiatic lion, which famously has a much smaller, sparser mane than African lions and is smaller in stature too, and the uncle replied that this is exactly what the *leoncillo* looks like. Moreover, even its name translates as 'little lion'.

Could this creature be one and the same as the ruffed cat? I gave the latter crypto-cat that name in the apparent absence of any known local name for it, but perhaps its local name is *leoncillo*. Alternatively, might the *leoncillo* genuinely be a fourth Mexican mystery cat in its own right? Yet although Mexico is a very large country, with plenty of remote mountainous areas, could it truly harbour no fewer than a quartet of mystery cats? Without any physical evidence to examine for at least three of them (or maybe all four if, as I suggested a while back, the alleged Rodriguez *onza* specimen wasn't a true *onza* after all, but merely a puma that looked like one), at this point we simply can't say.

Anonymous ShukerNature reader's post, 8 Jan 2024.

The alchemy of ice

DAVID HAMBLING ponders the many mysteries of water's transmutation from liquid to solid

Ice is no surprise at this time of year, but the mysterious transmutation from liquid to solid still has a whiff of alchemy about it. Francis Bacon suggested that "whosoever will be an Enquirer into Nature" should study ice, and 400 years later researchers are still unravelling its mysteries.

Standard ice has a regular structure, the molecules stacked in a neat tetrahedral pattern, giving rise to the familiar crystalline forms. But just last year researchers at University College London found that it could adopt a different structure. By cooling ice to -200°C and bombarding it with steel balls, they ended up with a disordered or amorphous structure, glassy rather than crystalline.

The new version was dubbed 'medium-density amorphous ice' because several forms of amorphous ice had been previously discovered – low-density, high-density and very-high density, the last two of which sink rather than floating in water. There are also an astonishing 17 distinct different crystalline forms of ice, all with slightly different structures and properties. Researchers believe there may still be more to discover.

The different types of ice are formed under different conditions. Here on Earth, ice usually starts out as water which cools slowly, allowing crystals to form. Faster freezing gives amorphous ice, and the vast majority of water in the Universe is believed to be drifting in interstellar space in amorphous form.

Amorphous ice may also appear on Earth, or at least high above it. The mesosphere lies above the stratosphere, at altitudes of more than 47km (30 miles). In summer, it fills with clouds of what meteorologists carefully call "particles of condensed water" or "amorphous solid water". Familiar clouds like cirrus are formed of ice crystals, the high-altitude versions appear to be of a non-crystalline form of ice.

LEFT: Noctilucent clouds over Stockholm.

KEVIN CHO / CREATIVE COMMONS

The particles are visible as noctilucent ("night glowing") clouds, first recorded as late as 1885. These are too faint to see in daylight, but may be visible in the summer months after sunset when the clouds still catch sunlight. Researchers had long speculated that these clouds were made of water rather than dust, but this was not proven until 2001. Noctilucent clouds are generally pale blue and wispy; they are still largely mysterious, being tantalisingly too high to access with aircraft or balloons. It is not clear where the water in them comes from – it may have been captured from space, like some of the dust in the upper atmosphere, rather than rising up from the ground.

Noctilucent clouds are still largely mysterious, being too high to access with aircraft or balloons

Satellite observations show these high-altitude clouds are much more widespread than previously thought, but their structure is unknown. They may mimic the shapes and dynamics of clouds at lower altitudes. Nor do we know how they relate to the curious electrical discharges at the same altitudes, known as red sprites and blue jets.

Comets are sometimes characterised as "dirty snowballs," being a mixture of ice, frozen gases, and dust; and amorphous ice seems to be a factor in comet outbursts, when one suddenly becomes far brighter as it releases a cloud of volatile material. In 2007 Comet Holmes, normally quite faint, became a million times brighter in a matter of hours and was visible with the naked eye. While Holmes is less than two miles in diameter, the halo of material around it a million miles across was briefly the largest object in the Solar System.

Amorphous ice releases energy when it changes form and crystallises into normal ice. The transition takes place when it is warmed to around 130 Kelvin/-147 degrees Centigrade. As the first molecules start to crystallise, the heat warms the molecules around them and may cause a chain reaction, taking hold like a forest fire. Astronomers believe that as a comet gets closer to the Sun, solar heating can trigger runaway crystallisation with a rapid release of energy, and it is this that leads to vaporising and explosive outbursts. However, precise understanding is difficult from millions of miles away, and comet outbursts are a matter of active research and lively debate.

Ice still holds mysteries at close quarters too, such as the question of how sea ice forms and grows. The basic pattern has been known for centuries. It starts with the formation of a suspension of ice crystals known as frazil. In calm conditions this forms a continuous flexible layer which gradually becomes solid. In a rougher sea, the frazil ice forms discs of pancake ice, which grow until they join together.

As frazil forms, the salt molecules – which do not fit into the crystal structure – are forced out in a process called salt rejection. This produces concentrated brine, which does not freeze but gets trapped in cells inside the sea ice, or forms brine channels beneath it. The action of these cells and channels has a major effect on the rate and pattern of ice formation.

Ice cover over the Arctic Sea has been declining at some 3% per decade since the Eighties due to a combination of air and sea temperature increases. The complexity of sea ice formation makes modelling and predicting the decline a major challenge. Antarctic sea ice is also declining, but for subtly different reasons, mainly a rise in the temperature of the ocean at depths of 100m-600m (330-1,970ft).

There is a feedback effect with sea ice and global warming. The ice sheet has been called Earth's heat shield, and less ice means less sunlight is reflected back into space. This leads to more heating, leading to less ice. The future of the planet may depend on the exact balance between ice formation and melting, and scientists are racing to understand it.

According to Francis Bacon's biographer John Aubrey, his ice research ended badly as he caught a chill while stuffing a chicken carcass with snow (see **FT401:46-47**). Bacon wanted to see if meat could be preserved this way, but his chill turned to fatal pneumonia within days. Bacon was thus an early martyr in a field of scientific exploration which is now more important than ever.

MEDICAL BAG

FT's overworked emergency room deals with the painful consequences of festive season sexual shenanigans and ill-advised eating choices

SNAP!

In a study published in the *British Journal of Urology*, Dr Nikolaos Pyrgides from the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich reported that the Christmas period is associated with a significantly increased risk of penile fractures. These occur when the erectile tissue of the penis snaps, usually because of forceful bending during over-enthusiastic sexual intercourse. When this happens, there is an audible crack and immediate detumescence, then severe pain, swelling and bruising. "When [patients] present to their doctor their penis often looks like an eggplant," Pyrgides said, adding that "This injury tends to occur during wild sex – particularly in positions where you're not in direct eye contact [with your partner], such as the reverse cowgirl." He also concluded that "Most penile fractures occur in unconventional scenarios, such as during extramarital affairs or when sex is performed in unusual locations."

Pyrgides made his discovery by analysing the hospital data for 3,421 men who suffered penile fractures in Germany between 2005 and 2021, finding that "if every day was like Christmas, 43% more penile fractures would have occurred in Germany from 2005 on". He also found that the risk increased at weekends and over the summer holidays, but not on New Year's Eve. "It would be interesting to see data from other countries, but in Germany, Christmas week is widely celebrated, while New Year's Eve tends to be a bit quieter," Pyrgides said. *theguardian.com, 20 Dec 2023.*

WINDY CITY

Also tying their medical research to the coattails of Christmas were a team from Texas Tech University, who had been investigating retrograde cricopharyngeus dysfunction (R-CPD), also known as "no burp syndrome". This happens when the cricopharangeal muscle at the bottom of the throat is unable to relax to let gas escape from the stomach. Sufferers experience symptoms that include loud gurgling noises from the neck and chest, bloating, stomach-ache and excessive flatulence, all of which are increased by the indulgences of Christmas. The Texas team found that the "socially awkward gurgling noises" and flatulence embarrassed sufferers at Christmas parties and left them depressed and anxious. They highlighted that botox injections relieved the symptoms and said that more awareness was needed to combat stigma and to encourage people with the condition to seek treatment. *Times, 22 Dec 2023.*

JAMES LINSELL-CLARK / SWNS

LWY / FLICKR

TOP: Chris Cowsley managed to inhale a spider in his sleep and was unable to breathe. **ABOVE**: Even more alarming was the case of a Singapore man with a whole octopus lodged in his œsphogaous after eating a dish of *sannakji* or live octopus.

DECAPITATION REVERSED

Surgeons in Jerusalem saved 12-year-old Sulieman Hassan's life after he suffered "internal decapitation" when a car knocked him off his bike. The impact severely damaged the ligaments connecting his skull to his spinal column so that they could no longer hold the bones together, leaving his head attached to the rest of his body just by his skin and muscles. The accident did not sever the spinal nerves, but left Sulieman at severe risk of this happening without immediate surgical intervention. By installing plates in his neck during complex and innovative surgery, medics were able to reconnect Sulieman's head, allowing him to be sent home in a neck brace without suffering long-term nerve damage. *the-sun.com, 14 July 2023.*

SPIDER MAN

When Chris Cowsley, 52, woke up at 3.30am unable to breathe, he thought he was going to die. "I had to stick a finger down my throat to get some air in, but as soon as I took it out I couldn't breathe again," he said, but managed to call 999 and summon help. Checking his throat, paramedics said that it was likely that he had inhaled a spider in his sleep and that it had bitten his uvula on the way down, causing it to swell up and obstruct his breathing. Cowsley was taken to Lister Hospital in Stevenage where he was given antibiotics and anti-inflammatories and was well enough by 7.30am to be sent home. *walesonline.co.uk, 27 Jul 2023.*

SUCKERED

Following a seafood meal, a Singapore man found he had trouble swallowing and repeatedly vomited, so went to the Tan Tock Seng Hospital where he was given a CT scan by doctors. This revealed a dense mass in the man's œsophagus, which, when they investigated it with an endoscope, turned out to be an entire octopus lodged just above his gastric sphincter. Doctors attempted to push the cephalopod down into the man's stomach, and when that failed, to pull it out. Eventually they removed it by hooking an endoscope behind it and dragging the octopus up the man's œsophagus until they could grab it with forceps and remove it. It's not known quite how the man came to swallow an octopus whole, but up to six people a year die in South Korea from eating *sannakji*, a live octopus dish that is a national delicacy. Most victims die when the creature's suckers stick to the side of the diner's throat and asphyxiate them. *nypost.com, 5 July 2023.*

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

Why were the grandees of globalism lining up in front of an eschatological Grayson Perry tapestry at Davos 2024? **NOEL ROONEY** looks out for the latest manifestations of Old Nick…

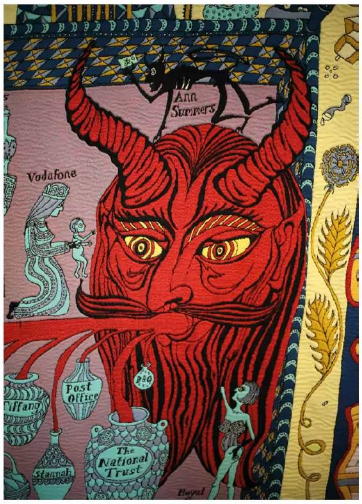
THE DEVIL'S BANQUET

And what would Davos be without the Devil? Not that the day-to-day denizens of the place are especially diabolical (at least, not that the Conspirasphere has got wind of yet); but when the Wholly Evil Foundation rolls into town for its annual jamboree, the virtue meter hits the red zone. And this year there was visual proof.

The WEF is popularly known (about the only way one can work 'popular' and 'WEF' into a single sentence) as a grandiose, and occasionally grandiloquent, talking shop for those folks who have grown wealthy beyond their competence: think Bono explaining AI. Surrounded by menial midwits identifying as experts, the grandees of globalism get to tell everyone else what's good for them – geese and ganders get nary a mention.

But, to those who have eyes to see and ears to listen, the WEF is the epitome of Illuminati skulduggery. It is (if that's not a contradiction in terms, but who's counting?) the shop window for the secret cabals (Bilderberg, Skull and Bones, CFR, etc) that run the world. The likes of Yuval Noah Harari, a historian thought by some observers to possess somewhat more confidence than intellect, can perorate on 'useless eaters' and offer some vivisectionist input on the location of the soul; but the real business takes place in smoke-free rooms, or possibly blood-soaked cellars. Where else indeed would Old Nick get to shoot the crow with the carrion birds of late capitalism?

This year, a tapestry hung in the shop window, along with the genial psychopaths in too expensive suits. The work of Grayson Perry, *The Walthamstow Tapestry* is, apparently, a vision of the life of a person from birth to death. Rather than walk a hard road, Grayson's 'everyperson' floats from cradle to grave on a river of blood, encountering various personifications of the corporate world along the way, before disappearing into the waiting jaws of – you guessed it – Satan himself.



METROPOLITAN IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The Devil doesn't spend his whole time chasing canapés

And the various personifications of political evil who lined up for selfies in front of the textile eschatology seemed to very much approve. Grayson, who has been playing with the idea of gender, wickedly and wonderfully, for years, has perhaps been adopted as the WEF mascot for gender fluidity, a position I suspect is too lapidary for the artist but Goldilocks grade for the great and good. But smile please, say cheese, and take a step to the left so we can see the Devil in the detail.

My favourite interpretation of the tapestry and its cameo at the Devil's banquet is that it's a diabolical process of product placement. Perry names corporations in the work and then visualises them in cartoon style; North Face gets a cute little car, for instance. So, I suppose, it's the knitted version of a business card; and if you're in the weave, you're in the band.

Of course, the Devil doesn't spend his whole time chasing canapés from one overstuffed concert hall to another; though one might be forgiven for thinking that many of his colleagues at Davos do precisely that for a living. No, Nick is a busy demon these days, and in a sphere we might not immediately connect with the Prince of Darkness. It seems we should add a new name to the many appellations of the evil one: AI.

I have to confess an opinion here; I think the whole AI scare is a paper tiger. As I understand it, the leading experts, when asked if there is an intelligent computer on the planet, have all answered no; then there's a pregnant pause and they say, "But there will be." I think intelligent computers are about as likely as intelligent pebbles; it's all just a matter of calculus.

But add Satan to the mix and who knows? And given that Satan is now a consultant for the Illuminati (and probably always has been) then it stands to reason, of a particular kind, that the WEF are lurking in the wires alongside him. And there's the conspiratorial rub, encapsulated in a stern warning: "Do not fear a computer program, fear those who hide behind it." Quite.

If you are now harbouring a vision of grey eminences peeking out from behind an oversized box of flashing lights and not much else, my work here is done.

And in other news, the addled tourism that morphed seamlessly into an armed insurrection, now universally known by the flip moniker J6, has thrown up another little furore. Two pipe bombs were, allegedly, planted at the headquarters of both major parties; Kamala Harris was apparently in the DNC building at the time. This serious incident was treated a little less than seriously by law enforcement, as evidenced by video of police officers hanging out with the bomb and taking selfies.

Now it is alleged that the FBI have known for some while who planted the bombs. They discovered the bomber's licence plate (presumably on CCTV, so at least something was working properly that day) and then refused to act. Why? Because the licence plate belongs to a government employee, according to a whistleblower.

The 'false flag' narrative of J6 has gained a lot of traction recently, some of it seeping out of the C-sphere and into the media (more Tucker Carlson than CNN, obviously). Intriguingly, the story has firmed up over time despite the best efforts of almost everyone in the American governing classes to bury it, along with the people who have been prosecuted for it. I occasionally have the intoxicating thought that it might become a theme in the upcoming presidential election. Trump that, Satan.

www.infowars.com/posts/bizarre-satanic-tapestry-displayed-at-wef-davos-summit/; https://allnewspipeline.com/Satanic_WEF_Propaganda_Network.php; https://potustoast.com/j6-pipe-bomber-unmasked-as-ex-government-official-fbi-fails-to-act-despite-having-license-plate-info/

THE ISLE IS FULL OF NOISES

More towns plagued by mystery hums; it's definitely not aliens, but it could be fish...

IRELAND IS HUMMING

Omagh, in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, is the latest town to be plagued by a mystery hum. Since September 2023, people across the town have been complaining to the council about a persistent and intrusive humming noise, usually occurring between 10pm and midnight. Initially reported from the Tamlaght Road area, it now appears to have spread to other parts of the town. "It's a bit of a mystery, like the Loch Ness monster really," said Barry McElduff, a Sinn Féin councillor. Alliance Councillor Stephen Donnelly said reports "usually characterise it as a persistent buzz or hum" that was definitely out of the ordinary and not something like traffic. Many people had told him that the noise was causing them problems sleeping. "For some people, it's something that they've gotten used to… for a considerable number of people, it's something that's providing a disturbance that is giving real cause for concern."

"You hear it when everything quiets down around 10 or 11pm," said Joe, 62, who preferred not to give a surname. "It's hard to describe. It's a low hum, like an engine. It wouldn't keep me awake; I've got enough noise in my head." Lisa Brannigan, 49, said she was "100% certain" it was not aliens. Council officials have responded to the reports, with their spokesperson saying, "Officers are currently investigating the use of specialist equipment, or procurement of a specialist company, to assist in detecting the source of the noise," but admitted that "Due to the wide area where the sound has been reported it is difficult to pinpoint the exact source(s)." Councillor Donnelly also felt that tracking the source might be challenging, saying, "It may well be that it's seasonal or weather-related, but these things often don't turn out to be simple and it may be a multitude of sources."

EDUARDO BLANCO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

SMITHSONIAN ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH CENTER

ABOVE: Omagh, in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, is the latest town to report a mystery hum. **BELOW**: The Tampa, Florida, hum is probably the result of mating black drum fish according to one marine biologist.

By January, Claudy in County Derry was reporting a hum too, described as a "low distant droning sound, more noticeable – by most who hear it – when indoors." One resident said "I first became conscious of a humming noise during the A6 roadworks. I put it down to the noise from those works as it sounded like a digger or earthmover working in the distance, however those have all since finished but the humming sound remains." She wondered if wind turbines were responsible. Councillor Declan Norris considered a possible source, saying, "I know that electricity cables were installed on electrical pylons in the area, and it is well known that they can emit a sort of humming sound when there is high humidity." As with most other hums, it seems that pinpointing a source has got no further than speculation. *BBC News, 14 Nov; upi.com, 15 Nov; theguardian.com, 21 Nov 2023; belfastlive.co.uk, 12 Jan 2024.*

HUMBER HUM

As well as the Irish hums, Immingham in Lincolnshire, a port on the appropriately named River Humber, has acquired its own hum. It starts as early as 3am, with people in the Killingholme and Stallingborough areas being particularly affected. While it is said to have been plaguing residents for up to six years, it has only recently been reported in the media, possibly because it seems to have got worse in recent weeks. Immingham resident Rachael Shead said the sound affected her "a lot", describing it as "like a droning noise that goes on and on and on," adding, "I can hear it over the telly, and the rain and the wind." Fingers have been pointed at local factories, oil refineries and underground cables as well as wind or solar farms, but North East Lincolnshire Council say their investigations have "drawn a blank", although they concede the hum could originate outside the borough. Dr Matt Barnard, an acoustic ecologist from the University of Hull said, "I can't give a definitive answer, it has to be something quite loud and powerful… These things can have a range of sources. In rare cases it could be geological, but typically it could be industrial sources or traffic. My inclination is it will have some sort of industrial source, but it will be hard to pin down because sound behaves strangely." *BBC News, 30 Jan 2024.*

READY TO RUMBLE

Progress does seem to have been made towards identifying the source of another persistent mystery noise. Residents of Tampa, Florida, have been plagued for years by a mysterious bass rumble (**FT429:17**) which was initially blamed on offshore party boats, but investigation revealed that these were not operating when most people were hearing the sound. Now, fisheries biologist James Locascio from the Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium in Sarasota believes he has nailed the source, mating fish. "This is a pretty uncommon phenomenon," said Locascio. "All these people are surprised by it because it's not well known." He is almost certain that black drum fish are responsible for the noise. When mating, the fish produce a deep bass sound by moving muscles against their swim bladders and it is loud and deep enough to travel through the ground as vibrations, which is why even residents living some miles away from the water can still hear it. This is a known problem in Punta Gorda, 100 miles (160km) south of Tampa, where local officials have explained that "Punta Gorda residents living along canals frequently hear black drum calls in their homes during the spawning season. This is possible because the low frequencies of these calls are able to travel through the ground and into the walls and floors of homes." Tampa residents have now raised more than $2,500 to pay for equipment to allow Locascio to determine exactly where their sound is coming from. This, though, is not likely to explain the UK's mystery hums as there are no fish on this side of the Atlantic that produce calls like the black drum. *theguardian.com, 30 Jan 2024.*

STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN rounds up the Euro-weirdness, from iridescent clouds to record-breaking ice discs

AERIAL PHENOMENA

In addition to the Northern Lights, many other signs in the heavens were observed in the European skies late last year. On 1 November 2023, at 6.20pm, a strange light, “a blue shiny globe” and mysterious explosive noises were seen and heard over Durmersheim, Germany. The witness said she had first seen the light in the sky, and after that, little blue lights in her garden. “All was lit up for two or three seconds. It really frightened me. It looked like a scene from the movie *Armageddon*. We looked the next morning, but found no traces.” Normally, such phenomena can be explained as bolides – but no meteor had been registered by the German tracking network, and police had received no further reports; and the blue lights in the garden remain unidentified. *bnn.de, 7 Nov 2023.*

On 21 December 2023, at about 8pm, Hennef, Germany, where I live, experienced the rather violent Storm Zoltan. My wife looked out of the living room window to the south (I was looking the other way) when she saw an enormous flash of lightning, going from cloud to cloud, then dissolving into a row of brilliant smaller dots of light. Was this a rare case of pearl lightning or an optical illusion? The general area around Cologne registered several tornadoes at the time.

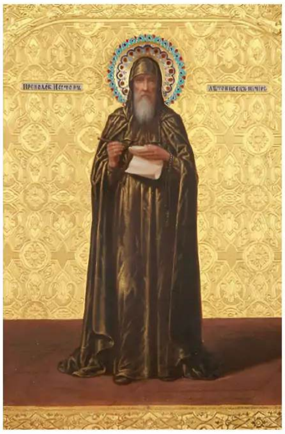
Finally, from the rare to the sublime. When clouds are close to the Sun or Moon, they can appear in rainbow colours or look like mother of pearl. Such cloud iridescence was photographed over Como, Italy, early in December. *laprovinciadicomo.it, 22 Dec 2023.*

SHEEP ON DOPE

As a result of the disastrous floods in Greece, food for sheep became scarce. The hay was spoiled, so the animals looked for food near greenhouses. And in one of them grew a very special grass; it was part of the largest production facility for medical cannabis in south-eastern Europe, located near Almyros in the region of Thessaly. The sheep smelled the stuff, jumped over the fence and began to eat, and destroyed at least 300kg of cannabis. Jannis Burunis, operator of the facility, told the Greek radio channel Mega: “I’m doing very well, but the sheep, which are raving mad, are doing even better. They now live in a beautiful world. The animals were stoned for at least two days and produced very good milk.” *Münchner Merkur, 7 Nov; netzwerk-kryptozoologie.de, 3 Dec 2023.*

WHEN ANIMALS ATTACK

A 33-year-old zookeeper was killed by a rhinoceros at Salzburg Zoo, Austria, on the morning of 12 September 2023. The woman was doing regular work in the enclosure and was preparing to smear the rhinos with an insect repellent to prevent bites when one of the 1.8-ton animals, a 30-year-old female rhino called Jeti, suddenly attacked her. Her husband, who rushed to her aid and tried to drive the rhino away, was seriously injured. According to the zoo’s director, Sabine Grebner, the keeper died in the zoo. It is unclear why the animal became aggressive. The keeper “was very careful and thoughtful with the animals and had an extremely good feel for them,” said Grebner. Jeti had been at Salzburg Zoo since 2009 and came from a reserve in Africa. *zdf.de/nachrichten, 12 Sept 2023.*



LEFT: Iridescent clouds photographed above Lake Como in December 2023. **BELOW LEFT**: Nestor the Chronicler – airbrushed from history.

> *“The animals were stoned for at least two days”*

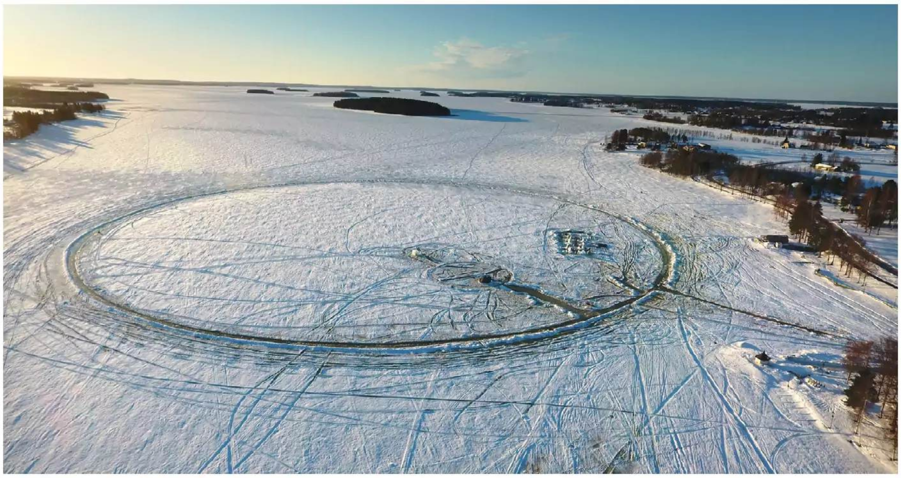
Meanwhile, an environmental activist from the German group “Wild Carpathians Initiative” entered a cave in the Carpathian Mountains, Poland, to protest for the conservation of the mountain range and to prove that deforestation had driven away the local bear population. This was not correct: the cave was home to a bear, which jumped out and chased the activist through the forest, injuring him, until he managed to climb to safety in a tree. He was recued by a helicopter from Zatwarnica and brought to a hospital. A wildlife camera recorded the attack. *Merkur, 19 Nov 2023.*

Attacks can also be of a less direct nature. Beavers caused damage at a railway dam at Oberstdorf in Bavaria, Germany, in October 2023, cutting the rail connection to the popular tourist spot for two weeks. The dam is now to be protected against beaver attacks with steel nets and stones. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, 3 Nov 2023.*

RUSSIAN REVISIONISM

History is revised from time to time – such as in the recent discoveries that Ötzi, the South Tyrolian iceman, had dark skin or that Vlad, the Romanian count who served as role model for Bram Stoker’s Dracula, may have enjoyed a vegetarian diet (see **FT440:**9). And then, as in George Orwell’s *1984*, states can rewrite their own past for ideological reasons. In Russia, education minister Sergej Kravtsov and presidential advisor Vladimir Medinski presented a new history book for schools in September 2023 called *History of Russia from 1945 into the 21st Century*. It contains sections on the Ukrainian aggression against Russia, which led to the “defence operation” we have been seeing for the past two years, and also teaches children that in 1989 West Germany annexed East Germany. *tagesschau.de, 1 Sept; Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, 23 Dec 2023.*

In April, another history textbook for schools, *The World Around Us,* was revised, with the monk Nestor, the earliest source for Russian history, expurgated from the text.



KRAATTERIJÄRVEN JÄÄKARUSELLI CRATER LAKE ICE CAROUSEL / FACEBOOK

LEFT: The record-breaking ice carousel created in Finland by Janne Käpylehtos.

Whereas conventional history says that the first state of the Rus, the Vikings who founded Russia, was at Kyiv and in 882, the new version has an even earlier state in Novgorod in 862. While Novgorod is located in Russia, there is no modern state location given for Kyiv. Meanwhile, new statues of the Soviet dictator Stalin were unveiled, for example on 1 February 2023 in Volgograd. Putin himself has said that Stalin was one of "the great leaders". The old mass murderer was not so bad, then! *dw.com, 5 Mar; fr.de, 21+23 Aug 2023.*

MAN-MADE 'MYSTERIES'

The Balearic island of Majorca experienced strange and unusually high waves on the shore of El Molinar in the summer of 2022. The sea suddenly began to rush and roar and powerful waves hit the rocks. This went on for a minute or two before the waves became calm again and after about three minutes the sea was as calm as a millpond. And this happened regularly every day between 10 and 11pm. The Oceanographic Institute Palma could suggest no explanation, but the Spanish Weather Bureau Aemet had an inkling. "Generally, weather phenomena have no fixed times," meteorologist Miquel Àngel Gili explained. "So I can rule out that it has anything to do with the Moon, the tides, the wind or something similar." He thought a large ship might be the cause, but he had no idea which. He assumed a cruise ship or a large tanker might be responsible. Fisherman Joaquín of the Fishermen's Association in Palma finally solved the mystery. Each evening, at 10 pm, the fast and very futuristic-looking ferry of the shipping company Baleària entered the port of Palma on its run from Barcelona, and this was the cause of the unusual waves. *mallorcamagazin.com, 17 July 2022.*

Rotating ice discs in rivers and lakes became a minor sensation in the wake of the crop circle phenomenon. In Finland, people actively produce such ice discs for fun, often as part of winter fairs, using motors to make the discs rotate. In the winter of 2022/2023, Janne Käpylehtos and his team created an ice disc with a diameter of 516m (1,700 ft) and a thickness of 42cm (16in) at Lake Lappajärvi in southwestern Finland (an ancient meteor impact crater). The gigantic rotating ice carousel brought the record for such merry-go-rounds to Finland, beating Chuck Zwilling's previous record-breaking example in Little Falls, Minnesota, in the US with its diameter of 405m (1,350 ft.). *nordisch.info, 7 Feb 2023; blick.ch, 5 Mar 2023.*

MISTAKEN OBSERVATIONS

I live in the Bonn area of Germany and have noticed for some time how often police and firemen are called because people see people or dead bodies floating in the Rhine here – this is probably true of any large river. On 6 December 2023 police were alerted at 6.40am by a probably drunk eye-witness that a person was in the river, and that someone was on the banks trying to rescue them. Police searched the banks at Königswinter and Bonn-Mehlem and used boats, drones and a helicopter, but called the search off at 7.50am when they failed to find a body. *ksta.de, 6 Dec 2023.* On 15 December 2023, another witness reported a dead body in the river at Niederkassel – and this time police did locate a body – which proved to be an authentic looking sex doll, but with the head missing. *ksta.de, 6 Dec; Rhein-Sieg-Anzeiger, 16 Dec 2023.*

A SWISS HAUNTING

A ghost that haunted the home of the Spicher family (mother Rosmarie, 71, and son Benjamin, 41) in Ueberstorf in the Swiss canton of Fribourg was investigated by ghost hunters in April 2023. The family's farmhouse is quite basic, as reporters found out, with few modern amenities, and was being pestered by a resident ghost. In order to get rid of the spook, the Spichers sought help from Ghosthunters Switzerland, an association that deals with paranormal problems of this kind free of charge.

"I suspect that this is my grandmother. She was a spiteful woman who argued with everyone," Rosmarie Spicher told ghost hunters Simone (48), Manuel (32) and club founder Thomas Frei (51). She said that she often woke up at night and heard noises in the calf barn that could not possibly come from the animals. Benjamin stated that the dogs next door often behaved strangely. Also, according to him an oppressive and gloomy atmosphere had been experienced on the farm for generations.

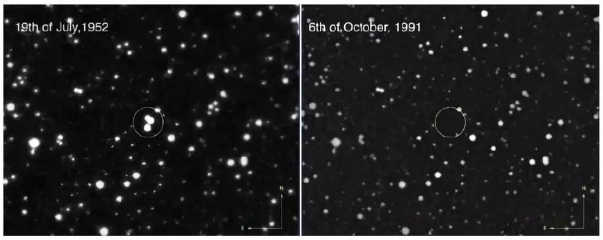
The investigators were equipped with modern ghost hunting devices such as an EMF detector, which measures electromagnetic fields (EMF). Thomas Frei explained that we are all made of energy and that when the physical body expires, these energies remain, "which we can measure with the EMF device and possibly see on the camera." Measurements were taken in the mother's bedroom, in the kitchen, in the place where her father-in-law died and in the calf barn. However, the instrument failed to register anything, and even Frei, who says he is a medium, did not feel anything unusual. Simone, however, managed to photograph some orbs which are, according to Frei, "bundled energy that may be different beings. It can be a deceased person, but also spiritual helpers or elemental beings." In this case, Frei soberly remarked that these orbs were simply dust in the air. The ghosthunters concluded that there were no spirits on the Spicher farm, but admitted they could not say where the noises came from or why the dogs behaved strangely. *blick.ch, 22 April 2023.*

ASTRONOMICAL TRANSIENTS

New astronomical data align with dates of a classic UFO incident

While most celestial events have a duration measured in thousands, if not millions, of years, some are of much shorter duration and risk being missed by conventional astronomy. As a result, the Vanishing & Appearing Sources during a Century of Observations (VASCO) project has been set up to search for fleeting astronomical events, particularly stars that vanish. Today, astronomers' view of the sky is cluttered with satellites and debris from over 60 years of launches, all of which could potentially produce glints that might be mistaken for an intriguing phenomenon. Rather than try and do live observation and then filter these out, VASCO has opted to start by using historical data from before the mid-1950s, when there would have been no human-made objects in orbit to confuse matters. Their researchers have been going back through an object catalogue created by the US Naval Observatory (USNO) and archival photographic images from the early 1950s, taken by the Palomar Observatory in California, that have been digitised and made publicly available. They then compare these images to those in modern databases from the Palomar Sky Survey, PanSTARRS, and the Gaia satellite.

Initially, the primary aim of the project was to seek out failed supernovas, where a star directly collapses into a black hole at the end of its life, rather than exploding dramatically first. Such stars would appear to simply blink out of existence in a moment. While considered theoretically possible, no instances of this occurring have ever been found, mainly because no one had looked. However, given that their data came from before the human space age, researchers quickly realised that they also had the opportunity to spot technosignatures from alien civilisations. As a result, they expanded their search to look for glints from alien probes in the Solar System, orbiting satellites pre-dating our own, and laser signals from other civilisations.



ABOVE: An image from the 1952 survey showing three transients compared to the same location 40 years later.

So far, VASCO has not found any failed supernovas, but it has turned up several images where multiple star-like objects appear on a single photographic plate but are then never seen again. The first one they found was a plate containing nine faint objects looking like stars captured in a 50-minute exposure taken on 12 April 1950. However, they were absent in the image taken just 30 minutes earlier and in another image from six days later. They followed up this finding by searching all available archives to see if the objects had been photographed at any other time, and ultimately pointed the world's largest optical telescope, the Gran Telescopio Canarias, at the locations where the transients had been. They found nothing; the objects had appeared, then, just as swiftly, vanished. As these objects were at the limits of observability, the VASCO researchers were concerned that they could be artefacts caused during developing, defects in the original photographic plate or other contamination. To rule this out, they searched for anomalies on other dates that potentially lined up with these, as would be the case if the objects were something orbiting Earth. They found two statistically significant candidates, and three weaker ones that did not quite reach the level of significance, but came close, suggesting that it was possible that the 12 April photo could have captured reflective objects orbiting the planet. This could indicate technology of non-human origin present in orbit around the Earth.

The military dismissed the radar traces as "temperature inversions"

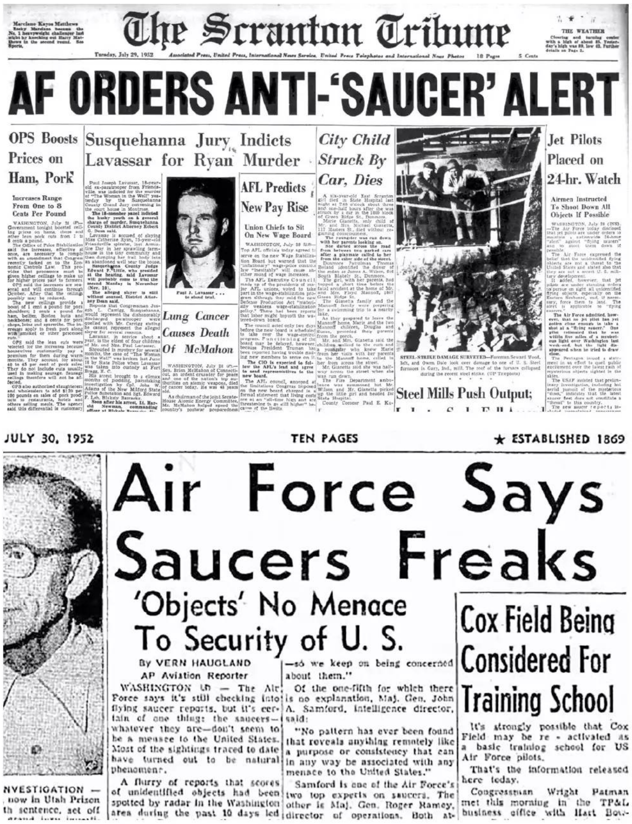
Even more intriguing was an image from the Palomar telescope's automated sky survey, taken on 19 July 1952. This showed three very bright apparent stars, described as being "as real as Betelgeuse itself" that vanished again within the time it took to expose the next plate.

The researchers looked at the possibility that this could be the result of gravitational lensing, in which a supermassive foreground object like a black hole had bent light from other stars to create a momentary image. However, the object would have had to be moving rapidly, or else the image would appear in more plates, and this is considered unlikely; so the things photographed are more likely to have been physical objects close to the Earth.

VASCO project leader Beatriz Villarroel, a researcher at the Nordic Institute for Theoretical Physics (Nordita) in Stockholm, made a fascinating connection, though: 19 July 1952 falls right in the middle of one of the largest UFO incidents in history. Between 12 and 29 July that year, huge numbers of UFO sightings were reported over Washington DC, with simultaneous radar-visual sightings, and even a Navy fighter being scrambled to shoot down an object (see **FT265:32-37, 425:29**). The US military dismissed the radar traces as "temperature inversions", but were silent about what the multiple eyewitnesses could have seen. The peak periods for sightings were during the two weekends 19-20 July and 26-27 July 1952, with the Palomar transients being photographed during the first of these. Villarroel also notes that elsewhere, between 1948 and 1951, the National Archives of Australia record a monthly average of 15 UFO sightings reported, but there were 536 reports in July 1952. It does appear that something was going on, and the Palomar survey may have captured the evidence.

As coincidence is always possible, Villarroel decided to look back at the earlier anomaly, when the nine objects were photographed, to see if any of the other objects that potentially lined up with those could have been seen during the 1952 Washington event. They could: the best candidate for a subsequent image of the earlier transients turned up in an image from 27 July 1952, right in the middle of the second weekend of the UFO sightings. VASCO's two brightest and most prominent cases of multiple transients occurred during the two weekends of the Washington UFO event, reinforcing the likelihood that they had photographed some of the objects potentially responsible.

To get a better idea of whether the apparent objects VASCO detected were visible over Washington in 1952, Villarroel wanted to see if they could be found in images from observatories closer to



Marciano Kayos Matthews

The Scranton Tribune

Tuesday, July 29, 1952 Associated Press, United Press, International News Service, United Press Telephotos and International News Photos 18 Pages 5 Cents

THE WEATHER

AF ORDERS ANTI-'SAUCER' ALERT

OPS Boosts Prices on Ham, Pork

Increases Range From One to 8 Cents Per Pound

Susquehanna Jury Indicts Lavassar for Ryan Murder

Paul J. Lavassar . . . to stand trial.

AFL Predicts New Pay Rise

Union Chiefs to Sit On New Wage Board

Lung Cancer Causes Death Of McMahon

City Child Struck By Car, Dies

STEEL-STRIKE DAMAGE SURVEYED—Foreman Seward Wood, left, and Owen Dale look over damage to one of U. S. Steel furnaces in Gary, Ind., mill. The roof of the furnace collapsed during the recent steel strike. (UP Telephoto)

Steel Mills Push Output;

Jet Pilots Placed on 24-hr. Watch

Airmen Instructed To Shoot Down All Objects If Possible

JULY 30, 1952 TEN PAGES ★ ESTABLISHED 1869

Air Force Says Saucers Freaks

'Objects' No Menace To Security of U. S.

By VERN HAUGLAND
AP Aviation Reporter

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Air Force says it's still checking into flying saucer reports, but it's certain of one thing: the saucers—whatever they are—don't seem to be a menace to the United States. Most of the sightings traced to date have turned out to be natural phenomena.

A flurry of reports that scores of unidentified objects had been spotted by radar in the Washington area during the past 10 days led

—so we keep on being concerned about them."

Of the one-fifth for which there is no explanation, Maj. Gen. John A. Samford, intelligence director, said:

"No pattern has ever been found that reveals anything remotely like a purpose or consistency that can in any way be associated with any menace to the United States."

Samford is one of the Air Force's two top experts on saucers. The other is Maj. Gen. Roger Ramey, director of operations. Both at-

Cox Field Being Considered For Training School

It's strongly possible that Cox Field may be re-activated as a basic training school for US Air Force pilots.

That's the information released here today.

Congressman Wright Patman met this morning in the TP&L business office with Hart Bow-

NVESTIGATION —
now in Utah Prison
th sentence, set off

ABOVE: Newspaper headlines from July 1952 report the US Air Force ordering an "anti-saucer alert" before turning to the weather to explain the Washinton DC UFO flap.

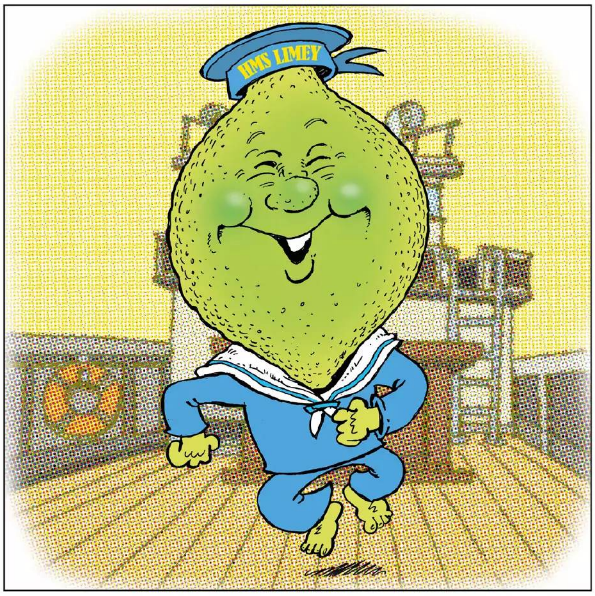
Washington than Palomar in California. A possible source was the Digital Access to a Sky Century @ Harvard (DASCH) project, which has digitised portions of Harvard College Observatory's photographic plate collection. Being on the East Coast, Havard is a lot closer to Washington. However, in 1952, a new observatory director, Donald Menzel, took office. Menzel had considerable form as a UFO debunker, and indeed was responsible for the "temperature inversion" explanation for the Washington UFO flap. On entering office, Menzel had a portion of the photographic plate collection from the previous few years destroyed, and from 1953 stopped the observatory from carrying out photographic plate surveys of the sky. It didn't resume them until 15 years later, after Menzel left office.

Villarroel is not discouraged and still wants to investigate more photographic plates from the summer of 1952 to see whether there was a higher incidence of anomalous transients than in previous summers. VASCO has also started the ExoProbe project to search for similar transients in the modern sky and track them in real time, which, they hope, will give them a better chance of capturing images of potential alien tech around our planet, as well as fleeting astronomical events. *thedebrief.org, 21 Jan 2023; "Exploring nine simultaneously occurring transients on April 12th 1950", 2021, Scientific Reports, 11, 12794; "Is there a background population of high-albedo objects in geosynchronous orbits around Earth?", 2022, arXiv: 2204.06091; "A Bright Triple Transient that Vanished within 50 Minutes", 2023, Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society, 527, 631; "Discovering vanishing objects in POSS I red images using the Virtual Observatory", 2022, Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society, 515, 1380.*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

277: LIBERATED BY LIME



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

Scurvy was defeated by lime juice.

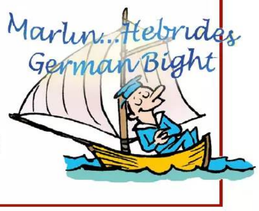
The "truth"

The opposite is true – when the Royal Navy started insisting its sailors take regular doses of lime, the incidence of scurvy on board its ships rose. At one time, it wasn't unusual for 50% of the crew on a long sea journey to die of scurvy, a condition we now know to be caused by a prolonged lack of vitamin C in the diet. A cure or preventative would make running a far-flung empire a lot more practical, and generations of seafarers, physicians, scientists and bureaucrats searched for an answer. Neither sulphuric acid nor seawater proved to be the secret ingredient, nor even urine. Progress was hampered by superstition, in-fighting, too much weight being given to celebrity opinion, and excessive adherence to scientific orthodoxy; the efficacy of citrus fruits was found and lost several times over the centuries. It wasn't until 1795 that Britain's Royal Navy was finally persuaded to include lemon juice in the daily ration for all crew; overnight, scurvy ceased to be a major naval problem. Unfortunately, the Napoleonic Wars caused the RN to switch from lemons (found mostly in enemy territory) to limes, grown in British colonies. Lime has significantly lower levels of vitamin C than lemons or oranges; scurvy returned to the ships, and for a while the whole idea that citrus was effective against it was discredited.

Sources

The Perfect Tonic, by Camper English (William Collins, 2022); www.sciencehistory.org/stories/magazine/the-age-of-scurvy/; www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2021/february/finding-cure-scurvy; www.bluesci.co.uk/posts/forgotten-knowledge

Mythchaser



We're often told that the Shipping Forecast, broadcast on BBC radio and much loved by inland listeners, survives today only for its æsthetic and nostalgic value, no longer being of practical use to mariners. Can any old salts out there confirm or deny this?

NECROLOG

This month, a dedicated follower of Nessie joins the great monster hunt in the sky and we bid farewell to a post-punk musician and artist who photographed fairies

PHOTOS: ANDREAS TROTTMANN

ABOVE: Rip Hepple, and the van in which for many years he drove around Loch Ness. **FACING PAGE**: Musician, artist and fairy photographer John Hyatt.

RIP HEPPLE

When he started "Ness Information Service" (aka NIS, aka *Nessletter*) in January 1974, Rip Hepple explained that his aim was to "gather information, news and views, to file for future interest and to help keep interested members in touch and as far as possible up to date." In this he spectacularly succeeded. To receive a *Nessletter* was less like getting a newsletter, but more like reading a letter from an old friend. From the first issue to the last, *Nessletter* 164 in February 2018, the "Ness Information Service" appeared, first regularly every two months, later, in age and after the loss of his wife, more sporadically.

Rip Hepple had become interested in the Loch Ness monster and in the 1960s helped the crew of the Loch Ness Investigation Bureau with all kind of repair jobs, although he was also known for daring monster watches on isolated loch banks. Tim Dinsdale, who called him "Mr Fix-it", records several of these incidents in his 1975 book *Project Water Horse*.

Rip worked as a baker at that time, and later had a job in forestry. After a year of full-time employment with the LNIB he started to work as a miner in Weardale in 1971, extracting the mineral fluorspar. He worked in the mine for 20 years.

To keep interested people in touch after the Bureau had disbanded in 1972, he started the "Ness Information Service". His *Nessletter*, sent from his home in Bishop Auckland, was special in that it also included private thoughts and family news.

Rip met his wife-to-be Doris in 1955, and they married in 1974. When she suffered a heart attack on 16 August 2004, he organised his life to care for her, and when she died on 25 July 2009 from a stroke, he was devastated. He had known her for 54 years, they had been together for 38 years and married for 35 years.

He had never found writing easy, he said, and the *Nessletters* became rare after this. Rip was a strong believer in large unknown animals in Loch Ness, although he grew disillusioned in his later years due to a lack of credible new sightings, and he started asking questions like "What if Nessie never existed?" and considering the possibility that "perhaps it does not exist."

Yet he never gave up the hope of seeing for himself the creature he had been looking for so long. He had spent most of his holidays at the Loch in the hope of a sighting. Once, his daughter Heather briefly observed "a black, dolphin-like head" surface off Lochend on 27 August 1986. Rip was no wild-eyed believer, and far from naïve. His *Nessletters* were extremely level-headed, well-informed, polite and open to all opinions and reports, and Rip tested each sighting according to its own merits, often noting that the witnesses had only seen a boat wake or mergansers on the smooth water. So, typically, Rip thought that what his daughter had seen was a fish.

Nessletter never had a large print-run – Rip told me he sent *Nessletter* 60 to a few dozen members in the mid-1980s – but I think it was influential for all its readers. Each issue ended with the notice that all "news, views, and thoughts are important". I think all in the field will be sad to learn of Rip's death, and his always interesting, knowledgeable and restrained comments will certainly be very much missed. Thanks to Andreas Trottmann for his help.

Rip Hepple, Loch Ness Monster researcher and communicator, born 1935; died 5 Nov 2023, aged 88.

Ulrich Magin

JOHN HYATT

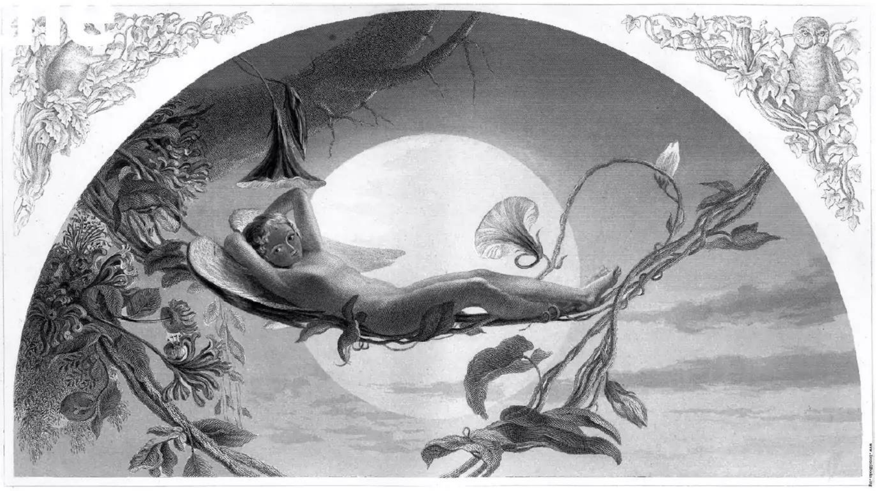
In the early 1980s John Hyatt was familiar to indie music fans as vocalist of The Three Johns, a politically inclined post-punk group formed by John Langford, previously of The Mekons. Much loved by John Peel, they recorded numerous sessions for him. Hyatt also performed as a member of the band GlamGoth when The Three Johns were on hiatus. He came to the notice of forteans through his claim to have photographed fairies in Whitaker Park in Lancashire's Rossendale Valley during 2014 (**FT314:4**), although he never revealed the exact location, saying "I won't be more specific because I don't want people going and trashing it."

At the time, Hyatt snapped what he believed to be a cloud of insects. "I was out with my camera deliberately trying to photograph fast-moving things. I didn't actually see them with the naked eye because they were moving fast. I went back home and looked at them on the computer and then I realised what I'd photographed," Hyatt said. Once blown up, his photo showed several tiny, winged entities, apparently with trailing arms and legs, which he believed could be fairies. He exhibited his photos

at The Whitaker Rossendale Museum & Art Gallery, and they swiftly garnered international attention, although many doubted that they showed anything other than insects, with the Natural History Museum saying they were probably chironomid midges. Asked if he really thought they were fairies, Hyatt said: “I don’t know what they were. I know they were interesting photographs. I have always stayed on the fence deliberately because the interesting thing about them going worldwide was to see the world’s reaction to them.”

Throughout his music career, Hyatt continued to work at Leeds Polytechnic as a teacher of fine art and practising as a visual artist, eventually going on to be Head of Department for the Faculty of Art and Design at Manchester Metropolitan University and, later, Principal of John Moores University Faculty of Art in Liverpool. Following his fairy photograph, Hyatt plunged deeply into researching fairy traditions worldwide and went on to create artworks based on his findings and experience, which he credited with “changing my life”. Almost simultaneously with his photo achieving international prominence, Hyatt was diagnosed with throat cancer, which he successfully beat, although the disease returned during lockdown, this time terminally, and he spent his last months in a hospice in Wirral where he continued to paint and held an exhibition of his work that reflected his experience.

John Hyatt, artist, musician and fairy photographer; born Wolverhampton, 17 Oct 1958; died Wirral, 4 Dec 2023, aged 65.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

SUPERNATURAL SOUNDS

I’ve recently become interested in sudden noises before or after fortean encounters: in what follows, the noises are italicised.

Here’s a description from a teenage girl in bed in Devon in the 1970s. She, poor thing, was shocked to see an anomalous ball of light power through her house: “I heard a loud metallic *ping* like a triangle being struck. A ball of light appeared from the bathroom door and started to move horizontal and evenly...”

Here is another British encounter. This time – we are in the 1990s – a middle aged man woke up, walked into his friend’s garden and came face to face – there is no easy way to say this – with a dragonfly dressed in a cap and tunic! “I wandered around, admiring and talking to the plants when I heard a *pop*, turned my head and saw something flying towards my face.”

Or what about this one from California in the 1960s? A young woman was in a meadow. There had been a strange feeling in the place, but nothing had been visible. She had been, in fact, about to make her way home. Then at the “edge of the meadow, just as I was entering the brush again, I heard a *bell*. A tiny crystal silver type of bell. It rang just once. I can still hear it. It has stayed with me for all my life. I turned around and then I saw the faeries and elves were at play, as if they couldn’t wait any longer for me to be gone.”

“I HEARD A BELL. A TINY CRYSTAL SILVER TYPE OF BELL. IT RANG JUST ONCE. IT HAS STAYED WITH ME FOR ALL MY LIFE”

I have a dozen similar accounts of noises before a sighting. But I also have some (admittedly fewer) instances where supernatural encounters end with a sudden noise. Take this classic recorded by proto-fortean John Aubrey: “Anno 1670, not far from Circencester was an apparition: being demanded whether a good spirit or a bad, [the apparition] returned no answer but disappeared with a curious perfume and most melodius *twang*.”

Forget (if you can) the smell. Here again is a sound that brackets a supernatural encounter. How do we explain these bracketing sounds? Some sleepers experience audio hallucinations on waking up. This seems to be connected to one rather shadowy unpleasant condition: ‘exploding head syndrome’. Wakers hear non-existent loud noises as they come round. Are bracketing sounds just, then, physiological gear-shifts? Are they perhaps the sign that an experient is still in a half-dream state? Or do the kinds of audio cues given above actually mark the arrival of a non-physical being, in the same way that a drop in temperature is supposed to herald the coming of a ghost?

I have, of course, no idea!

Simon Young edited the 2023 collection *The Wollaton Gnomes: A Nottingham Fairy Mystery*

Enigmatic UAPs

NIGEL WATSON rounds up the latest news and views from the world of ufology

THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

Enigma Labs, based on the Lower East Side of New York, has created an app that provides a safe place to report UAP sightings. It includes a camera feature that allows users to take uncompressed video recordings of UAPs along with metadata of the filming location and other information for later analysis.

The app can identify mundane objects like planes, balloons and satellites, but as it is in a "listening mode" it does not mark any reports as resolved; reports received have ranged from a drunk seeing a Starlink satellite to someone saying they had "the biggest moment in my life."

So far, the app has received 12,000 reports from 107 countries. The majority (78%) have been submitted by reporters in the USA. Most of the sightings (25%) were of circles or spheres, followed by 13% that were of lights. They note that the reports they have collected date back to 1947 and conform to Jacques Vallée's finding that the higher the strangeness of an experience, like alien abductions or sightings of nearby craft or entities, the less likely it is to be reported.

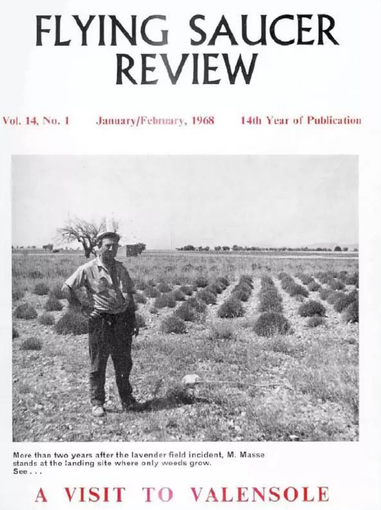
The CEO of the company, known only as "A", says that as this is a new field of study, "It can't be a category until you have data to work with. We're doing the picks and shovels of that." I'm sure ufologists who have been toiling away at the coalface of ufology long before UAPs became the latest popular fixation will be surprised at that statement!

'A' is open to the possibility that UAPs could be associated with ancient aliens, advanced fighters, future humans, multidimensional projects or just plain drones. Such theories she leaves to others, who she says are potential Nobel Prize winners. Given that flying saucers, UFOs, UAPs and so on have been buzzing around in our skies for decades, if not centuries, I'd say a Nobel Prize is even more unlikely and elusive. *enigmalabs.io*

WHEAT FROM THE CHAFF

The policy of not openly "resolving" UAP cases followed by Enigma Labs bypasses the old dilemma of separating "real" anomalous phenomena from explicible ones.

As Andrew May says, in his Retro-Forteana blog, even if a small percentage of cases do remain unexplained, that does not make them evidence of something exotic in our skies. In most cases, he says that: "If you can't ascribe an obvious explanation to them, it's most likely a consequence of poor-quality data. It's true they remain 'unidentified', but that's not the same as saying they're anomalous." He also damns the term UAP, especially now that it has come to stand for Unidentified *Anomalous* Phenomenon rather than Unidentified *Aerial* Phenomenon. This new usage is a sloppy term, because "it implies you could have an 'Identified Anomalous Phenomenon', which is a contradiction in terms."



FLYING SAUCER
REVIEW

Vol. 14, No. 1 January/February, 1968 14th Year of Publication

More than two years after the lavender field incident, M. Masse stands at the landing site where only weeds grow.
See . . .

A VISIT TO VALENSOLE

ABOVE: Lavender farmer Maurice Masse at the site of his 1965 close encounter on the cover of the Jan/Feb 1968 edition of *Flying Saucer Review*.

IFO FEARS

As the chief investigator for the Center for UFO Studies in the 1970s, Allan Hendry found, as did other major UFO studies, that while most UFO cases can be explained, a small percentage stubbornly defy explanation. In 1978, Hendry said he was happy to regard the cause of these residue cases as either sociological or extraterrestrial, adding: "But I know there's no blanket explanation at this time."

In his book, *The UFO Handbook: A Guide to Investigating, Evaluating and Reporting UFO Sightings* (Doubleday, 1979), one of Hendry's most important findings is that many identified sightings inspired extreme emotional responses. Sightings of what were identified as the Moon and stars prompted the witnesses to report fearing the end of the world, being scared to death, wondering if they were viewing a sign or premonition, and being "torn between terror and curiosity".

Similar responses to Identified Flying Objects have been detailed elsewhere. One good example is given by Jenny Randles in her article "Vendetta With Venus", where she recounts that on the morning of 1 December 1978 a couple saw an unusual UFO from their home in Urmston, Greater Manchester. To the witnesses it looked so bright and large that they knew it was not a star. They saw a "vehicle" detach itself and "...the 'star' sped to Earth. In a few seconds it had landed on the meadows beside the River Mersey, a half mile or so to their south-east. As it fell to Earth, a beam of light was shot from star to vehicle, and then back in reciprocation. The 'vehicle' itself was of course only seen momentarily in the pitch black, but it looked like a bee-hive with 'tyres' around it."

The husband drove towards the river to find the fallen star, but he only saw a few coloured lights, which might have been from the nearby Shell oil refinery. Local UFO investigators not only identified the craft as an Adamski-style scout ship but also connected it with the disappearance of seven cats in the area. In contrast, Jenny noted it was "...clear to me that most if not all of the strange aspects of the case were attributable to the cold and unusually clear atmosphere distorting Venus at its most brilliant."

forteana-blog.blogspot.com/2024/01/unidentified-doesnt-always-mean.html

mufobmagazine.blogspot.com/2014/03/vendetta.htm

VALENSOLE VISION

Many UFO cases have become classics; take the landing of a craft seen by lavender farmer Maurice Masse on 1 July 1965 at Valensole, Basses Alpes, France. He saw an egg-shaped craft land, from which two short, large headed, humanoid beings emerged. One of them fired a light beam at Masse, which immobilised him for 15 minutes. The craft left marks in the ground after it flew away.

However, a recent study by Éric Maillot claims that Masse, rather than seeing a classic ET craft, was actually having a memory of "a traumatic, anxiety-provoking situation experienced during the Second World War. This key moment of observation would be the trigger for acute psychotraumatic stress which would have altered his awareness of reality and his motor skills." Maillot thinks that after the sighting Masse suffered from dissociative disorders, and that the real stimulus for the sighting was the landing of a military helicopter.

One person's IFO is another one's exotic visitor from beyond – which, of course, makes assessing UFO data notoriously difficult.

cnegu.forumactif.org/t196-analyse-clinique-de-la-rr3-de-valensole-1-etat-de-stress-psychotraumatique

Twister time in Todmorden

Battered by Storm Gerritt, JENNY RANDLES revisits a classic case from 1980 and finds new evidence

Late on the night of 27 December 2023 my mind drifted back to the post-Christmas days of 43 years earlier in the dark of Rendlesham Forest, Suffolk, about to interrupt my life 270 miles away. To this day it remains one of the most famous close encounters.

However, odd things were closer to home four decades later. I was in my front garden and Storm Gerrit had borne down on me. I tried one last time to get a little black stray cat that lived in my garden to come and shelter as the forecast was wild. On the doorstep, I tried to tempt her with some catfood on a plate as what sounded like an express train headed towards me: aircraft pass low over my house and the main rail line is near the end of my street, so either were possible causes. But not this time.

I watched in amazement as the plate was taken from my hands and did a fair impression of a flying saucer, spiralling upward into the darkness. I never found where it landed. Luckily, this event distracted the cat; as she watched her dinner heading for space, I managed to pick her up and get her inside. By now, the sound of roaring was scary, but by the time I'd locked the door it was fading; it lasted perhaps a minute. I thought nothing more of it until the following morning when the TV news revealed a tornado had wreaked havoc in the neighbouring borough. Had I not been outside so late because of the cat I would probably not have noticed this freak event, although as I knew (this was my third one) Britain, on a per-mile basis, has more tornadoes than anywhere else.

What has this to do with UFOs? Well, I was part way through writing this article when, as you will see, this event provided the perfect bit of synchronicity to introduce it. I was writing about another famous case from winter 1980 – four weeks before Rendlesham – in which PC Alan Godfrey was 'hijacked' by a UFO while driving his patrol car on Burnley Road outside Todmorden, West Yorkshire. I have written a lot about these events (**FT325-328**) and trust Alan's integrity, but had not expected to record details from a new witness 43 years on.

PC Godfrey encountered a top-like object above the main road beside the River Calder followed by a 15-minute period of missing time, later filled by hypnosis with images of meeting 'entities' inside the UFO. It had started before dawn on 29 November 1980 when a herd of cattle was reported wandering above the main road just outside Todmorden. It was pouring with rain. Alan searched, but found nothing. Then, a call came from a distressed elderly lady, so he drove over to hear her story. She said: "I know I'm old, but I'm not bloody senile!" and described strange noises outside the bedroom where five cows now roamed where none had been before. As she'd put the phone down, an extremely bright glow lit the sky for several seconds and the cows vanished. Alan reassured her and on leaving did another search, found nothing and returned to the station. The rain stopped an hour later as he filed paperwork, so around 5am he decided to make one last patrol. He drove in low mist that made the night feel "rather eerie". He noted a works bus pass the town centre collecting drivers booked to take out early services. Alan waved to the driver; 30 years later that driver came forward to say what he witnessed. Over the next 20 minutes both the bus driver and Alan saw something weird on the road ahead, now part of UFO folklore.

> "With that burst of light my view of reality was turned on its head"

Alan witnessed a top-like object at tree height just as he was about to turn up to the woman's home. He never got there, as his path was blocked by what he assumed was the works bus ahead. Bob, the bus driver, confirmed he did stop briefly there to observe a weird spiralling updraft from the road, but left to pick up the driver without ever seeing Alan. There was a flash of light akin to that reported by the woman when the cows vanished. In *Who or What Were They?* – the 2017 book I worked on with Alan – he said: "With that burst of light my view of reality was suddenly turned on its head. No longer was I sat there looking at the object directly ahead... I found myself driving the patrol car up Burnley Road maybe 100 yards beyond the other side of where the thing had been hovering." He had lost a full 15 minutes.

So both Alan and the bus driver were stopped by something unusual happening above Burnley Road. Another story came from a man who called Alan's station hours later to describe what he witnessed around the same time. He was driving from Burnley to Littleborough when an unusual white glow meandered from side to side on Burnley Road as he drove through Cliviger. At the same time, Leonard Smith – caretaker at a school off Burnley Road near where Alan's encounter occurred – was going to fire up the boiler. "I could not believe my eyes," he said, "[as] rising slowly from the valley below was a large sphere-like object." It reached the low cloud ceiling and moved away toward Cliviger in a zig-zag motion.

And now another witness has come forward who observed the aftermath of all these events. He told me he was on his way to work early that morning on the first bus of the day from Portsmouth, travelling in the opposite direction to the driver of the works bus, two hours after Alan's encounter. He was sitting in the front upper deck seat of the bus, with a good view. He says: "I noticed a lot of debris strewn across the Burnley Road in a circular shape as though a localised tornado had hit this spot... an area of debris consisting of twigs and small branches strewn in a circle across the width of the road between the Park Gatehouse and the Ukranian Club opposite. It resembled what I would imagine the kind of debris a whirlwind or tornado might leave behind but was very localised and confined to this small area."

For some years I have suspected the events of that night might fit a tornado with electrical charge causing physical effects – what meteorologist Terence Meaden calls a plasma vortex. This new account enhances that possibility. The weather that night was compatible with a plasma vortex that could theoretically account for many of the observations. But explaining how Alan's patrol car moved and he lost 15 minutes or why he described what he did under hypnosis is another matter. The new witness also verified the other big mystery of that night: the herd of cows. He confirms seeing them behind the locked park gates as he passed just beyond where he viewed the tree and bush debris. He guessed they had come from Bacup, given their location, but we know they came from the other side of the valley; and a tornado, presumably, did not pick them up and deposit them unharmed in the park.

We now have more evidence that something strange occurred to Alan that morning. If a rare kind of atmospheric vortex was present, it still leaves much unresolved, but importantly the integrity of a police officer who was to be forced out of the constabulary in the aftermath is vindicated.

AKRON
AKRON

MEGATRON ROBOT: ROB CLAPPERTON / AMUTEC: DEBBIE

THE DEVIL'S

PAUL CROPPER visits the industrial heartland of 19th century America to investigate a little-known poltergeist case in which an immigrant family was terrorised by mysterious rains of stones

In the late 1870s the least desirable real estate in Akron, Ohio, was in a blue-collar neighbourhood known not-so-fondly as 'Hells Half-Acre'. Close to the ironworks, the seedy precinct was the roughest, toughest and dirtiest in the booming industrial city. At its centre, a huge blast furnace belched fire and brimstone day and night. As one writer described it: "The night sky glowed a fiery red. Flames seethed, smoke writhed, and acrid soot smudged the air. If this wasn't the devil's domain, it certainly resembled it."[1]

For one wild week in October 1878, as stones, coal and pieces of brick fell outside and *inside* their house in the heart of that seething slum, it must have seemed to Michael and Maria Metzler that their humble abode had indeed become the Devil's playground.

A HUGE BLAST FURNACE BELCHED FIRE AND BRIMSTONE DAY AND NIGHT

TERROR IN THE CORN

Born in Bavaria in 1839, Michael Metzler had come to Ohio with his parents at the age of seven, part of a huge influx of German immigrants drawn to the region to work on the construction of the Ohio & Erie Canal.

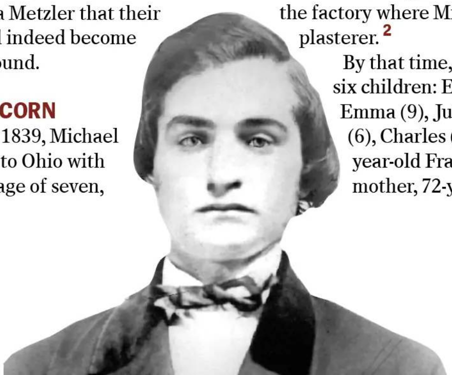
Michael married Maria Josephine Noss, an emigrant from Alsace Lorraine, in 1864, and in 1878 they moved their growing family into an old, one-and-a-half-storey brick house at 1219 High Street, Akron, close to the factory where Michael worked as a plasterer.[2]

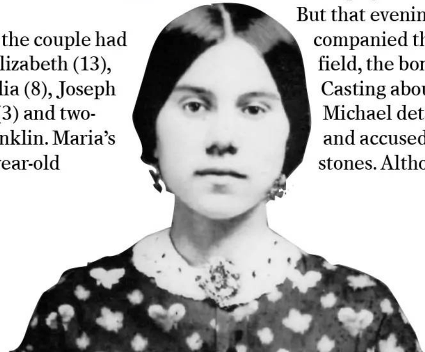
By that time, the couple had six children: Elizabeth (13), Emma (9), Julia (8), Joseph (6), Charles (3) and two-year-old Franklin. Maria's mother, 72-year-old Bridget Noss, was also part of the household.

The house stood about 25 feet (7.6m) back from the road. The lower part consisted of a dining room/kitchen and a bedroom. The kitchen had two doors directly opposite each other, opening onto the front and back yards.

The weirdness began on 8 October, a cloudy Tuesday afternoon, when Maria, Elizabeth and a neighbour, who were husking corn in a field a few hundred feet from the house, were suddenly hit by several small stones and clods of earth.

Thoroughly freaked, the women fled. But that evening, when Michael accompanied them back to the cornfield, the bombardment resumed. Casting about for an explanation, Michael detained a nearby lad and accused him of throwing stones. Although the boy pleaded





BELOW: Michael and Maria Metzler.
FACING PAGE: Father John Broun, of St John the Baptist Church.

DOMAIN

WORKS
OHIO
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The Geo R Lawrence Co.
Chicago
New York
Washington

his innocence, the Metzlers, still assuming they were being targeted by hooligans, complained to Akron's mayor, Robert F Scott. His honour, however, was powerless to act, so the family returned home disappointed and angry.

Anger turned to horror as the flinty fusillade continued closer to home, with stones the size of walnuts falling upon the head and shoulders of anyone who ventured outside. One evening, after they'd been pelted with small pebbles in the front yard, Michael sent the children back to the house, only to have them run out screaming that stones were now being thrown around *inside*. Realising at last that something decidedly uncanny was happening, Michael despatched his family to a neighbour's house, and, being a staunch Catholic, appealed for help to Reverend John Broun, pastor of the largely German St John the Baptist Church.

FATHER BROUN INVESTIGATES

When Father Broun duly visited the home and gamely attempted to exorcise the spook, he soon found, like many holy men before him, that polts don't enjoy being lectured. No sooner had he uttered a prayer than a stone fell at his feet and another struck him in the small of the back. A dozen pebbles, apparently coming from the ceiling, then struck others in the room. One press report stated that the priest "was so dismayed thereby that he went home in despair."

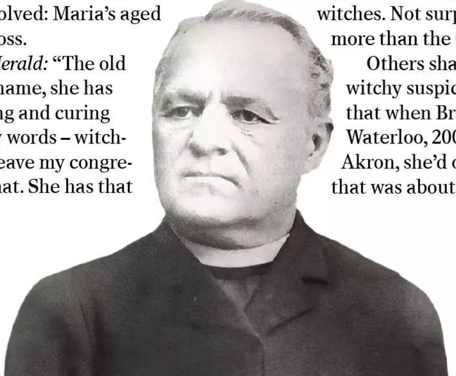
However, a few days later, when the Akron correspondent of the Cleveland *Herald* visited his residence, the pastor stated that the only strange event he'd observed was a single piece of coal falling at his feet – and that object, he suspected, had been thrown by someone in the room. One of the Metzler girls, who'd been standing by the coal-bucket at the time, firmly maintained her innocence, and her mother declared she'd been standing with an arm around the girl throughout the episode – a claim the priest dismissed as a lie.

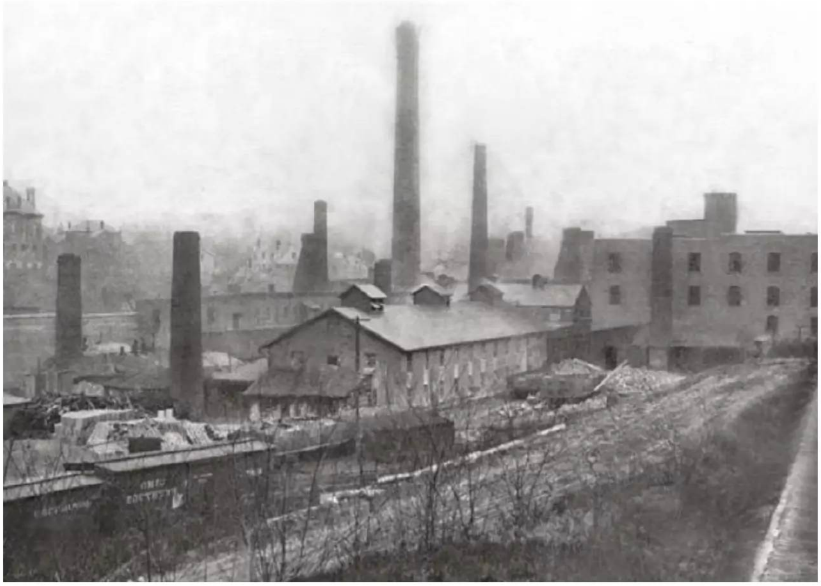
Strangely, soon after accusing Mrs Metzler and her daughter of hoaxing, the mercurial Man of God abruptly changed his tune, saying he was, in fact, convinced the events were supernatural and that one particular person was involved: Maria's aged mother, Bridget Noss.

As he told the *Herald:* "The old woman has a bad name, she has the name of healing and curing and such things by words – witchcraft. I made her leave my congregation for doing that. She has that power like many others who come from the old country, but we don't see much of it here. I thought at first this stone-throwing might be the work of her and the second daughter, whom she is possibly instructing in the art, but from the fact that the manifestations, by creating so much talk and drawing such disorderly crowds, must be a great annoyance to the family, I have thought that someone else, possibly possessing the same power, was doing it out of enmity towards her." [3]

Broun's suspicions are understandable given his background. Germany had been the heartland of the European witch trials and there was a continuing belief in the reality of witches among many who migrated to the Americas. As recently as 1805, two girls from the Hilderbrand family of Bethel, Ohio, had accused a neighbour of witchcraft. After a magistrate was called, the case was decided by weighing the woman on a scale against a Bible, a traditional test for witches. Not surprisingly, she weighed more than the Good Book – a pass! [4]

Others shared Father Broun's witchy suspicions. Some whispered that when Bridget had lived near Waterloo, 200 miles (320km) from Akron, she'd owned a property that was about to pass to the sheriff





ABOVE: Smokestacks and factories dominated the Akron skyline in the 1870s. **BELOW:** A newspaper report on the "rain of stones" afflicting the Metzler family from the *Daily Globe* (St Paul, Minnesota) 16 October 1878.

due to an unpaid mortgage. After mysterious stone-throwing commenced, the house was sold at such a low price that the old lady was easily able to buy it back. Mrs Noss was also a midwife and, as one article stated, "skilled in the various virtues of roots and herbs".

Dabbling in traditional remedies, herbal cures and "secret women's business" has, of course, led to the hanging or burning of a great many innocent old women over the ages.

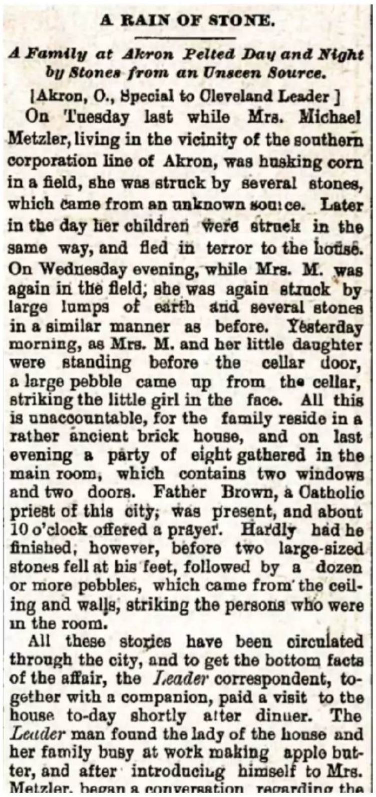
THE PRESS IMPRESSED

After Reverend Broun's visit, news of the strange events spread like wildfire, prompting large crowds to make their way to 1219 High Street. One Sunday, over 6,000 people descended on the house. As only a small number were permitted inside, some boys in the huge, tense crowd began throwing stones. When one lad was nearly killed by a large rock, a riot almost ensued and police were called to restore order.

The case attracted reporters from far and wide, and some were welcomed into the polt-plagued dwelling. A previously sceptical Akron *Beacon* journalist recounted his eye-opening experience:

"As 10 o'clock drew near both Mr and Mrs Metzler stated that the shower was probably over for the evening, as half past nine was the usual limit. However, the reporter and a few others remained and while all were watching each other, one of the party was struck quite sharply on the foot with a pebble, from all that could be seen, thrown by some invisible hand. On examination it was found to be wet and fresh earth still adhered to it, showing conclusively that it had come from the yard, having been wet by the evening rain; but there was no opening of any sort through which it could come from the outside. Presently another considerably larger passed between Mrs Metzler and her little daughter, apparently starting from the wall, and lighting in the middle of the floor. Neither had moved a muscle at the time, and the bystanders were perfectly satisfied that they were not responsible for the missile." [5]

"IT IS SAID THAT THE STONES FALL DEAD, NEVER ROLLING OR REBOUNDING"



A RAIN OF STONE.

A Family at Akron Pelted Day and Night by Stones from an Unseen Source.

[Akron, O., Special to Cleveland Leader]

On Tuesday last while Mrs. Michael Metzler, living in the vicinity of the southern corporation line of Akron, was husking corn in a field, she was struck by several stones, which came from an unknown source. Later in the day her children were struck in the same way, and fled in terror to the house. On Wednesday evening, while Mrs. M. was again in the field; she was again struck by large lumps of earth and several stones in a similar manner as before. Yesterday morning, as Mrs. M. and her little daughter were standing before the cellar door, a large pebble came up from the cellar, striking the little girl in the face. All this is unaccountable, for the family reside in a rather ancient brick house, and on last evening a party of eight gathered in the main room, which contains two windows and two doors. Father Brown, a Catholic priest of this city; was present, and about 10 o'clock offered a prayer. Hardly had he finished, however, before two large-sized stones fell at his feet, followed by a dozen or more pebbles, which came from the ceiling and walls, striking the persons who were in the room.

All these stories have been circulated through the city, and to get the bottom facts of the affair, the *Leader* correspondent, together with a companion, paid a visit to the house to-day shortly after dinner. The *Leader* man found the lady of the house and her family busy at work making apple butter, and after introducing himself to Mrs. Metzler, began a conversation regarding the

A *Montclair Times* correspondent was similarly baffled:

"In the evening, after dusk, accompanied by friends, he returned to the house, and while his friends were inside with the other members of the family, he made several circuits around the building with Mr Metzler. These circuits were all at different distances. From all directions stones came whistling around our heads. They came with a dull, monotonous whistle, and seemed to be in the air at least a quarter of a minute before they reached us. Nothing could be seen to explain how these stones were thrown." [6]

Other interesting testimony was recorded by an *Indianapolis Journal* reporter:

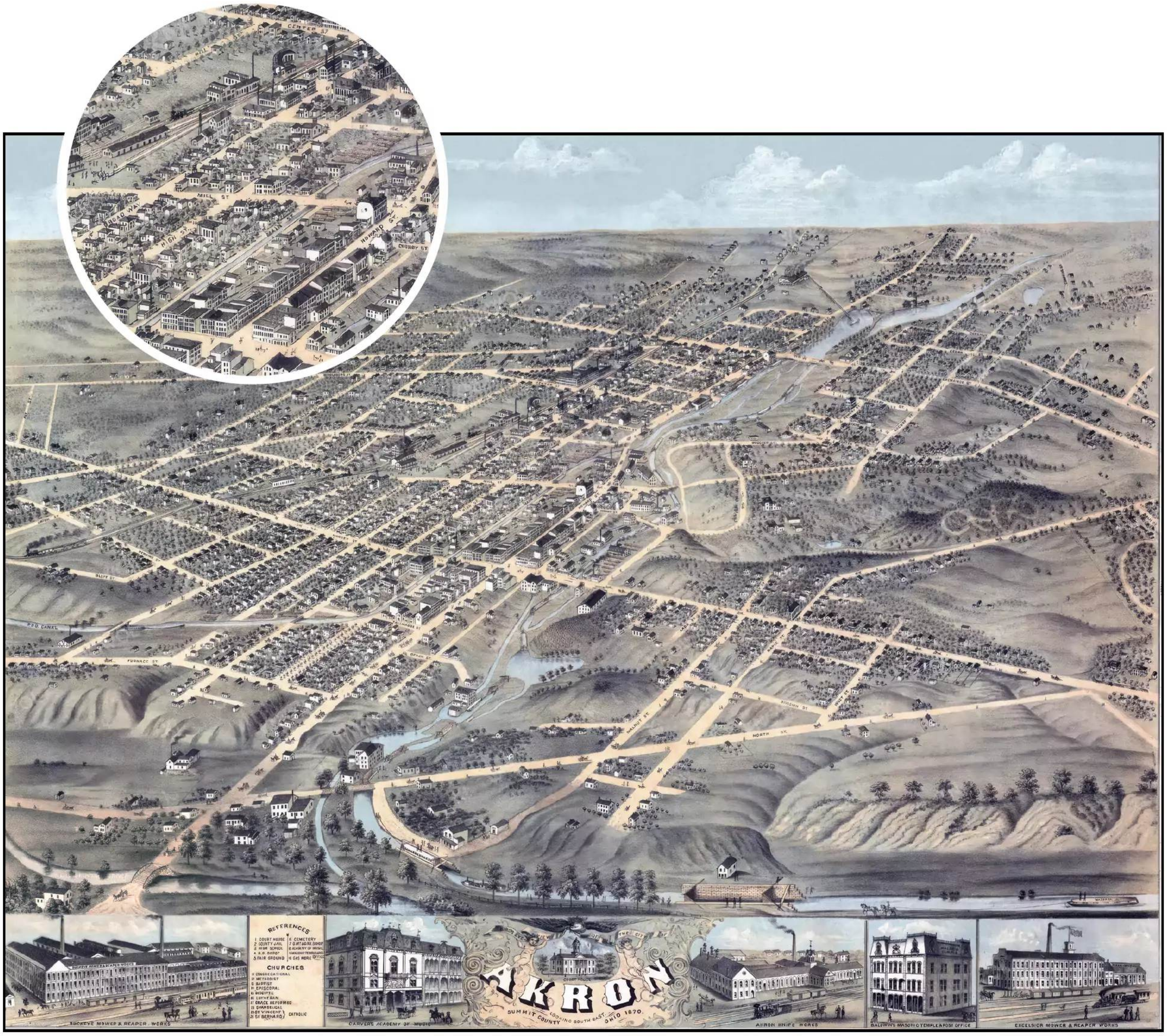
"Among the peculiarities of the stone-throwing, as related by the family and confirmed by others, are that in their flight they are accompanied by a whizzing sound, and that they are always damp, sometimes only on one side; and Mr Kummer says that one which he picked up after it fell was cold, as to be painful when held in the hand. It is said, also, that they fall dead, never rolling or rebounding." [7]Another journalist asked Michael Metzler if he thought spirits were responsible and received a rather odd reply:

"No, I don't," said Metzler. "I believe some people have the power to make the stones fall that way and be unsightable themselves, the same as some people can make robbers bring back stolen things." He then related instances of that character which had occurred in the old country which he knew to be truthful.

"Does it frighten you, Mrs Metzler?"

"Yes and I don't like it, too, because it draws so many people around the housework scandalously. Saturday night a big crowd of them was out there and they hollered and made the awfullest noise and called my mother a witch and acted awful mean. It makes her feel so bad that she's sick. I wouldn't care so much if they let her be and not say it's her that does it."

Significantly, perhaps, the 1878 episode wasn't the Metzlers' first brush with the supernatural. At a previous residence, shortly after her marriage, Maria had been at home one night with a friend when they heard several raps at the window. Thinking it was her husband, Maria called out but received no response. More raps followed, seriously frightening the two women. On arriving home, Michael took a light and scoured the area but found no one. Three weeks later, a letter from France advised them of the death of a favourite aunt. She had died on the same day, at the same time, as the strange rapping occurred.


REFERENCES
CHURCHES
BUCKEYE MOWER & REAPER WORKS
CARVER'S ACADEMY OF MUSIC
AKRON
COURT HOUSE
SUMMIT COUNTY
LOOKING SOUTH EAST
OHIO 1870.
AKRON KNIFE WORKS
BALDWIN'S MASONIC TEMPLE & POST OFFICE
EXCELSIOR MOWER & REAPER WORKS

ABOVE: A map of Akron in 1870. High Street, where the Metzlers lived (inset) is one block over from the Canal that bisects Main Street. **BELOW:** Nine-year-old Emma Metzler worked at the Barber Match Plant in Fowler Street. The manufacture of matches was just one of the many industries to which the city was home.

"THAT'S ALL, VOLKS!"

With excitement reaching a fever pitch, crowds growing and press interest peaking, the Metzler poltergeist followed a time-honoured tradition: it simply ceased its pesky pranks. Hungry for a resolution and convinced the events were hoaxed, one reporter turned up at the house with two police officers, determined to extract a confession from either grandma Bridget or young Emma Metzler:

"Emma, the one upon whom suspicion rests, was a black-eyed little thing, with an impish and dogged air that augured ill for the success of our errand. We remained at the house for over half an hour, trying first one and then another, together and separately. All spoke freely concerning the stone-throwing, but when asked who did it they persistently answered that they didn't know, and when pointedly asked if one of them did not do it they replied that they did not.

In the midst of the old lady's story, I asked her if she was sure she did not know who threw the stones.

'Ach no, no,' she replied.

MATCHES.
BARBER MATCH CO
171

'But you could do it if you wanted to?'

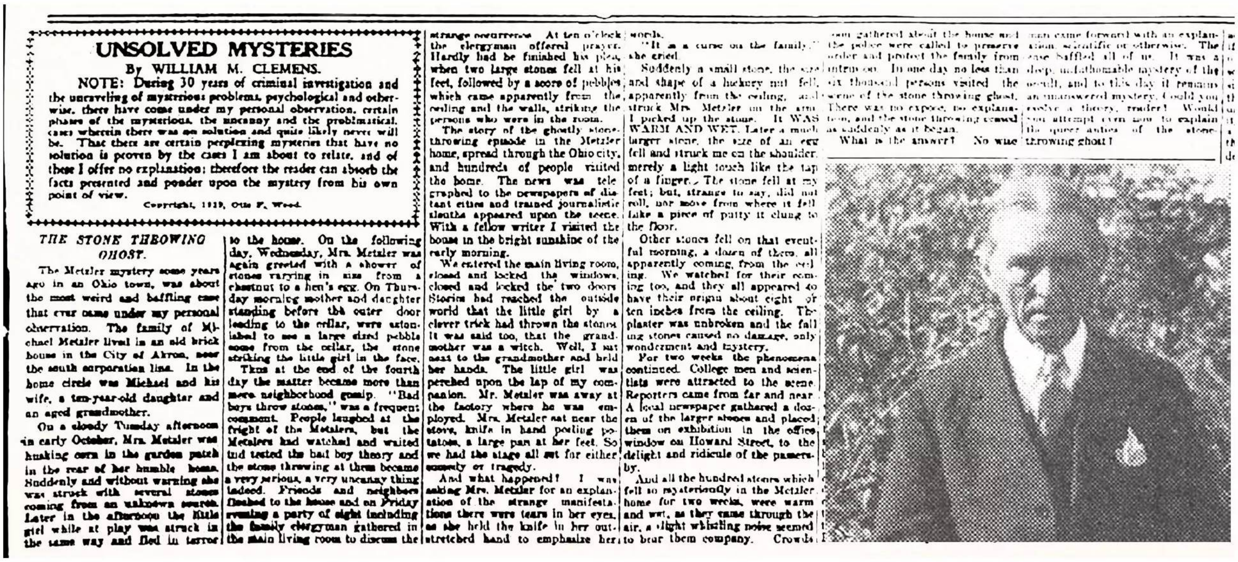
'Ah! Mein Gott in Himmel! Ich die when you tell me dot I do such dings!'

One of the officers questioned little Emma in the yard, separate from the balance, but she stood there looking straight ahead of her and patting her foot impatiently on the ground and answered persistently, 'I didn't throw them; I didn't throw them,' And we were forced to give up, as had those who had attempted it before us." [8]

Although only nine years old, Emma worked at the Barber Match Plant in Fowler Street, and ever since the weird episode began, she had been the target of considerable ridicule and abuse. After the police interview, the taunting became so bad that she was sent home. Despite the pressure, she continued to declare her innocence.

Michael and Maria were also accused. Some said that their home was about to be foreclosed and they wanted to scare away potential purchasers, but investigations showed their house was not, in fact, mortgaged. The couple had not profited from the events, and, much to their annoyance, their house had been overrun by visitors. Where was the benefit for them in their home, neighbourhood and reputation being turned upside down?

In December a sceptical *Cincinnati En-*



UNSOLVED MYSTERIES

By WILLIAM M. CLEMENS.

NOTE: During 30 years of criminal investigation and the unraveling of mysterious problems, psychological and otherwise, there have come under my personal observation, certain phases of the mysterious, the uncanny and the problematical, cases wherein there was no solution and quite likely never will be. That there are certain perplexing mysteries that have no solution is proven by the cases I am about to relate, and of these I offer no explanation; therefore the reader can absorb the facts presented and ponder upon the mystery from his own point of view.

Copyright, 1929, Otis F. Wood.

THE STONE THROWING GHOST.

The Metzler mystery some years ago in an Ohio town, was about the most weird and baffling case that ever came under my personal observation. The family of Michael Metzler lived in an old brick house in the City of Akron, near the south corporation line. In the home circle was Michael and his wife, a ten-year-old daughter and an aged grandmother.

On a cloudy Tuesday afternoon in early October, Mrs. Metzler was husking corn in the garden patch in the rear of her humble home. Suddenly and without warning she was struck with several stones coming from an unknown source. Later in the afternoon the little girl while at play was struck in the same way and fled in terror to the house. On the following day, Wednesday, Mrs. Metzler was again greeted with a shower of stones varying in size from a chestnut to a hen's egg. On Thursday morning mother and daughter standing before the outer door leading to the cellar, were astonished to see a large sized pebble come from the cellar, the stone striking the little girl in the face.

Thus at the end of the fourth day the matter became more than mere neighborhood gossip. "Bad boys throw stones," was a frequent comment. People laughed at the fright of the Metzlers, but the Metzlers had watched and waited and tested the bad boy theory and the stone throwing at them became a very serious, a very uncanny thing indeed. Friends and neighbors flocked to the house and on Friday evening a party of eight including the family clergyman gathered in the main living room to discuss the strange occurrence. At ten o'clock the clergyman offered prayer. Hardly had he finished his plea, when two large stones fell at his feet, followed by a score of pebbles which came apparently from the ceiling and the walls, striking the persons who were in the room.

The story of the ghostly stone-throwing episode in the Metzler home, spread through the Ohio city, and hundreds of people visited the home. The news was telegraphed to the newspapers of distant cities and trained journalistic sleuths appeared upon the scene. With a fellow writer I visited the house in the bright sunshine of the early morning.

We entered the main living room, closed and locked the windows, closed and locked the two doors. Stories had reached the outside world that the little girl by a clever trick had thrown the stones. It was said too, that the grandmother was a witch. Well, I sat next to the grandmother and held her hands. The little girl was perched upon the lap of my companion. Mr. Metzler was away at the factory where he was employed. Mrs. Metzler sat near the stove, knife in hand peeling potatoes, a large pan at her feet. So we had the stage all set for either comedy or tragedy.

And what happened? I was asking Mrs. Metzler for an explanation of the strange manifestations there were tears in her eyes, as she held the knife in her outstretched hand to emphasize her words.

"It is a curse on the family," she cried.

Suddenly a small stone, the size and shape of a hickory nut fell, apparently from the ceiling, and struck Mrs. Metzler on the arm. I picked up the stone. It WAS WARM AND WET. Later a much larger stone, the size of an egg fell and struck me on the shoulder, merely a light touch like the tap of a finger. The stone fell at my feet; but, strange to say, did not roll, nor move from where it fell. Like a piece of putty it clung to the floor.

Other stones fell on that eventful morning, a dozen of them, all apparently coming from the ceiling. We watched for their coming too, and they all appeared to have their origin about eight or ten inches from the ceiling. The plaster was unbroken and the falling stones caused no damage, only wonderment and mystery.

For two weeks the phenomena continued. College men and scientists were attracted to the scene. Reporters came from far and near. A local newspaper gathered a dozen of the larger stones and placed them on exhibition in the office window on Howard Street, to the delight and ridicule of the passers-by.

And all the hundred stones which fell so mysteriously in the Metzler home for two weeks, were warm and wet, as they came through the air, a slight whistling noise seemed to bear them company. Crowds gathered about the house and the police were called to preserve order and protect the family from intrusion. In one day no less than six thousand persons visited the scene of the stone throwing ghost. There was no expose, no explanation, and the stone throwing ceased as suddenly as it began.

What is the answer? No wise man came forward with an explanation, scientific or otherwise. The case baffled all of us. It was a deep, unfathomable mystery of the occult, and to this day it remains an unanswered mystery. Could you evolve a theory, reader? Would you attempt even now to explain the queer antics of the stone-throwing ghost?

ABOVE: In 1929 William Clemens (inset) wrote about "The Stone Throwing Ghost" in the *Akron Topic*, describing the "Metzler mystery" as "about the most weird and baffling case that ever came my way." Clemens visited the Metzler house in 1878 and could find no explanation for the rains of stones. **BELOW:** Paul Cropper with a handful of small stones that fell at Humpty Doo, Australia, in 1989.

quirer journalist summed up what he said was the public and media view:

"The whole event was shrouded in mystery. It remains and doubtless will remain one of the mysterious frauds of the day. I have seen Mrs Metzler three or four times since the occurrences… She invariably [states] that she has nothing new to communicate. The other members of the family have always been very reticent and continue so. In conclusion I can only say that I firmly believe with the public that the stone throwing was a big fraud. But how or why or by whom committed the Lord only knows." 9

HIS STRANGEST CASE

A far less harsh assessment was given by William Montgomery Clemens. Distantly related to the great American author and humourist Samuel Clemens, aka Mark Twain, William went on to write more than 100 books and hundreds of essays and newspaper articles.

The Metzler case puzzled him for the rest of his life. Over 50 years later, and only two years before his death, he wrote a piece for the *Akron Topics* magazine entitled "The Stone Throwing Ghost", describing his experiences at the house as a reporter for the Cincinnati *Enquirer*:

"With a fellow writer I visited the house in the bright sunshine of an early morning. We entered the living room and closed and locked the two windows and closed and locked the two doors. Stories had reached the outside world that the little girl had by a clever trick thrown the stones. Also it was whispered that the grandmother was a witch. Now I sat next the grandmother and held both her hands. The little girl was perched upon the lap of my companion. Mr Metzler was away at the factory where he was employed. Mrs Metzler sat near the stove, knife in hand, paring potatoes. At her feet was a large pan. Thus we had the stage set for tragedy or for comedy.

"And what happened? I was asking Mrs. Metzler for her possible explanation of the manifestation. There were tears in her eyes as, holding the knife in an outstretched hand to emphasise her words, she cried, 'It is a curse upon this family.' At that moment a small stone the shape and size of a hickory nut, fell, apparently from the ceiling, and struck Mrs Metzler on the arm. The stone was warm and wet. Later a larger stone – the size of an egg – fell and struck me on the shoulder – a slight touch like the tap of a finger. The stone fell at my feet, but did not roll or move from where it fell. Like a piece of putty it clung to the floor.

"Still other stones fell on that eventful morning all coming, apparently, from the ceiling. We watched for their coming, too, and all appeared to have their origin eight or 10 inches (20-25cm) below the unbroken ceiling plaster. The stones did no damage but they caused deep wonder.

"For two weeks such phenomena continued. Scientists were attracted to the scene. Reporters came from distant newspapers. A local newspaper gathered a score of stones and displayed them in its office window on Howard Street to the amusement of some and the interest of many.

"All the hundred or more of stones that fell in and near the Metzler home over a period of two weeks were warm and wet and, as they came through the air, a slight whistling noise seemed to bear them company. Police were called to protect the home from the crowds that gathered daily.

"Meantime there came no exposé of the thrower and no explanation of the throwing. At the end of a fortnight the latter ceased as suddenly as it began. What is the answer? No man, scientific or otherwise, came forward to explain. The case baffled us all. It was a mystery and to this day it remains an unsolved mystery." 10

REASONS TO BELIEVE

Several weird details, carefully documented by Clemens, are strikingly similar to occurrences mentioned time and again in accounts of poltergeist episodes throughout history.

He observed, for instance, that when stones fell they did not roll; instead they stuck where they landed, as if glued in place. He also noted that the stones were warm – and often wet – and that a strange whistling sound accompanied their flight. He further noted that when he was struck by a stone, the impact was unusually soft.

Similar "deadfalls" have been noted in the wider poltergeist literature. During the UK's famous Enfield case of 1977 (**FT32:47** and passim), researcher Maurice Grosse observed that marbles thrown in the home never bounced: "They would hit the floor and stay put as if actually placed there by an invisible hand." His colleague Guy Lyon Playfair observed exactly the same effect. 11

Very warm and very cold temperatures were noted during an 1898 stone shower in Phoenix, Arizona: "Though they landed sharply they brought no other pain than a scorching sensation. She picked the stones from the ground and found some warm and others almost ice cold." 12

During the 1998 Humpty Doo, Australia,

RAINING STONES: STRANGE STONE-THROWING CASES AROUND THE WORLD

GUYRA, AUSTRALIA, 1921

Weird stone-throwing targeted the Bowen family home, particularly young Minnie Bowen. Despite extensive police investigations, the source of the disturbances was never identified (**FT388-32-36**).

MAYANUP, AUSTRALIA, 1950S

In the south-west of Western Australia in the late 1950s, Aboriginal farm workers became the centre of two major outbreaks of mysterious stone-throwing at Mayanup and Pumphreys. The events, which continued for several years, were witnessed by hundreds (**FT147:57, 438:31-32**).

TUSCON, USA, 1983

Recently settled into a desert home, the Berkbigler family became terrified when large rocks started bombarding their house every evening. The situation escalated to its peak in early December, when one attack trapped two reporters inside the house, requiring a police escort to move them to safety. Despite efforts by police and locals to locate the throwers, no culprit was ever found. The events ceased in mid-December.

BIRMINGHAM, UK, 1981–1984.

For several years, residents of Thornton Road, Ward End, were subject to an almost constant barrage of small, polished stones. Despite police efforts totalling over 1,000 man-hours, no culprits were ever identified.

HUMPTY DOO, AUSTRALIA, 1989

A small blue house in the township of Humpty Doo in Australia's Northern Territory became the focus of a series of unexplained events over several months in early 1989. The five residents were subject to strange thumps and scratches, objects flying and a constant bombardment of tiny stones from their long gravel driveway (**FT112:21, 116:34-39**).

NAIPU, ROMANIA, 2017

In August, the Dobre family were subjected to a constant rain of rocks hitting the roof of their house, as well as other phenomena including objects moving and and lights switching on by themselves. The events seemed to be focused on their 11-year-old son, Andrei. Seeking help, they called a local priest and the police. The episode ended when Andrei visited a well-known monastery (**FT363-24-25**).

SOMBEK, BHUTAN, 2019

This baffling case involved the Ghalley family, with mysterious stone-throwing centred around their 15-year-old son Sunil. Stones bombarded the family's cattle hut and continued even after the family fled and sought refuge elsewhere. The stone-throwing persisted until a shaman's ritual appeared to bring a halt to the disturbances (**FT405:14-15**).

episode that Tony Healy and I were involved in (**FT112:21, 116:34**), a thermal camera revealed that falling and flying objects were uniformly warm all over, as if they had been heated in a microwave.[13]

Clemens also mentioned that when a large stone struck him on the shoulder, it had a strange, rather "light touch". The same was noted during a case in San Jose, California, in 1876: "Miss Molly Barry who is stopping at the house, was struck in the head by one of these missiles, but not the slightest pain was experienced by the concussion. The rock seemed to have come down gently upon her head and it rested there until she removed it."[14]

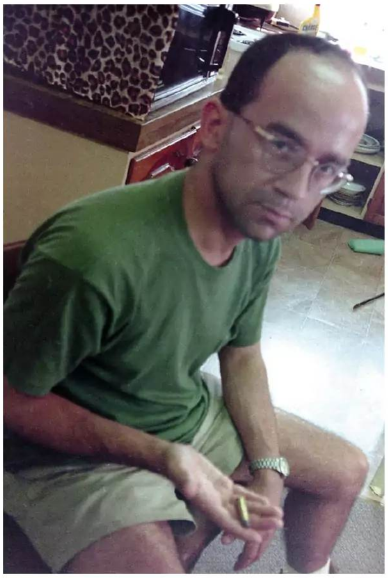
I experienced something similar at Humpty Doo. When a .44 Magnum cartridge – a weighty little object – fell on me, the impact was curiously soft and light. One of my companions said he'd seen the object "materialise" over my shoulder before it fell.[15]

As noted by Clemens and others, the Metzlers' flying stones were said to be accompanied by a strange whistling sound. At Mayanup, Western Australia, in 1955, a witness stated that the stone showers were preceded by a very long, low, eerie whistle that caused big hunting dogs to break their chains and flee (**FT147:57, 438:31-32**).[16]

The Akron case, therefore, displayed many hallmarks of a genuine poltergeist episode. Sceptics were unable to come up with a plausible reason why the family would choose to perpetrate a hoax – and, indeed, *how* they could have faked such mind-boggling phenomena. I have, therefore, little doubt that for that wild week in October 1878, the Metzlers' little home in "Hell's Half Acre" was infested by a very pesky polt.

Interestingly, while that episode was occurring in Akron, one of the most famous – and controversial – of all poltergeist cases was well underway in Amherst, Nova Scotia, in the home of 18-year-old Esther Cox. The case would continue for some months and later become famous as "The Great Amherst Mystery."[17] Objects were hurled, fires started and knocks and thumpings heard. As in Akron, a family's world was thrown into absolute chaos – a pattern that has been repeated countless times throughout the centuries.

For some other stone-throwing polts, see also **FT324:40-45** and **357:20-21**.



ABOVE: Paul Cropper with the.44 Magnum cartridge that fell on him in the Humpty Doo house, when "the impact was curiously soft and light".

PHOTOS: PAUL CROPPER

NOTES

1 Price, Mark; "'Hell's Half Acre' raises devil in Akron". Retrieved 12 March 2021: www.beaconjournal.com/article/20131006/news/310069340.

2 Ohio historian Jeri Holland identified the exact address of the Metzler house. Contemporary accounts located the home on the extension of South High Street, between Thornton and Voris Streets. The site is now a parking lot, on the east side of what is now South Broadway Street, around three hundred feet north of East Voris Street in South Akron.

3 *Indianapolis Journal,* October 18 1878.

4 Steven Rolfes; *Supernatural Lore of Ohio,* The History Press, Charleston, 2020, p. 34.

5 *Medina Country Gazette*, 18 October 1878.

6 *Montclair Times*, 9 November 1878.

7 *Indianapolis Journal,* 18 October 1878.

8 *Indianapolis Journal,* 18 October 1878.

9 *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 7 December 1878.

10 *Akron Topics* magazine, October 1929, pp. 22-23.

11 Guy Playfair, *This House is Haunted*.

12 Arizona *Republic*, 23 September 1898.

13 Tony Healy & Paul Cropper, *Australian Poltergeist*, pp. 21-23.

14 *Sacramento Bee*, 24 April 1876.

15 Healy & Cropper, op. cit.,p. 37.

16 Healy & Cropper, op. cit., p. 57.

17 Walter Hubbell, *The Great Amherst Mystery*, 1888.

PAUL CROPPER is a regular contributor to FT. He has investigated all manner of strange phenomena both in Australia and elsewhere and along with Tony Healy is the author of *Out of the Shadows: Mystery Animals of Australia* (1994), *The Yowie* (2006) and *Australian Poltergeist* (2014) and *The Yowie File* (2023).

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THE WILD MEN (AND WOMEN) OF METAL

The image of the Wild Man occurs across central Europe, particularly in Germany, adorning coins and coats of arms. But why is the *Wilder Mann* – and sometimes the *Wilder Frau* – such a recurrent image in the region's folklore and heraldry, particularly in areas with a history of mining? Our man in Bavaria, **STEVE TOASE**, investigates.

Moving from the bustling metropolis of Munich to a far more rural area of Bavaria, my fortean heart was gladdened when I saw the coat of arms for my new home.

Naila is a small town on the edge of the Frankenwald, a few miles from the old internal German border, and the coat of arms (*Wappen* in German) is dominated on the right hand side by a *Wilder Mann*. The more formal description is "Shield parted per pale; at dexter quartered of Sable and Argent; at sinister Gules, a savage Argent with apron and coronet of leaves Vert, standing on a mount Vert between two trees of the same and holding a mace by his right hand."[1] Although the current version is quite well groomed, the Wild Man shown on the earliest example of the Naila coat of arms is far more hirsute, much like the Woodwose of England (see **FT318:28-33**).[2]

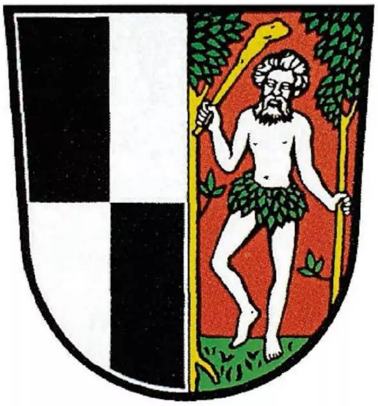
The residents of Naila seem particularly proud of their *Wilder Mann*, and he can be found as a full scale carving in the train station, in abstract form on local bridges, and memorialised in graffiti on a container on the edge of town. Up until 2019, the *Wilder Mann* was portrayed at events by local man Alex Rauh, who died in 2021.[3] But why was this figure adopted by the town for its coat of arms?

WILD IN THE COUNTRY

The study of Wild Men is always complex, especially as they occur all over the world. Even when looking only at Western Europe, it can be tempting to 'level out' rather than focus in on specifics.

The use of the *Wilder Mann* is not uncommon in Germany and Austria, seen on many coats of arms, both municipal and personal. In common with the Woodwose, *Wilder Mann* can be found in ecclesiastical settings, for example the 15th century wall painting discovered during restoration work on a church in Kenz.[4] The diverse, sometimes contradictory, meanings attached to mediæval portrayals of the *Wilder Mann* can be seen in Heinrich IX's use of the wild man figure on coins. This led to his subjects connecting him with the darker aspects of the *Wilder Mann*, while he was concerned with the more recent interpretation of the wild man as uncorrupted, removed from the faithlessness of the world.[5]

THE TOWN'S COAT OF ARMS SHOWS A *WILDER MANN* WITH WREATHS OF LEAVES AROUND HIS HEAD AND WAIST



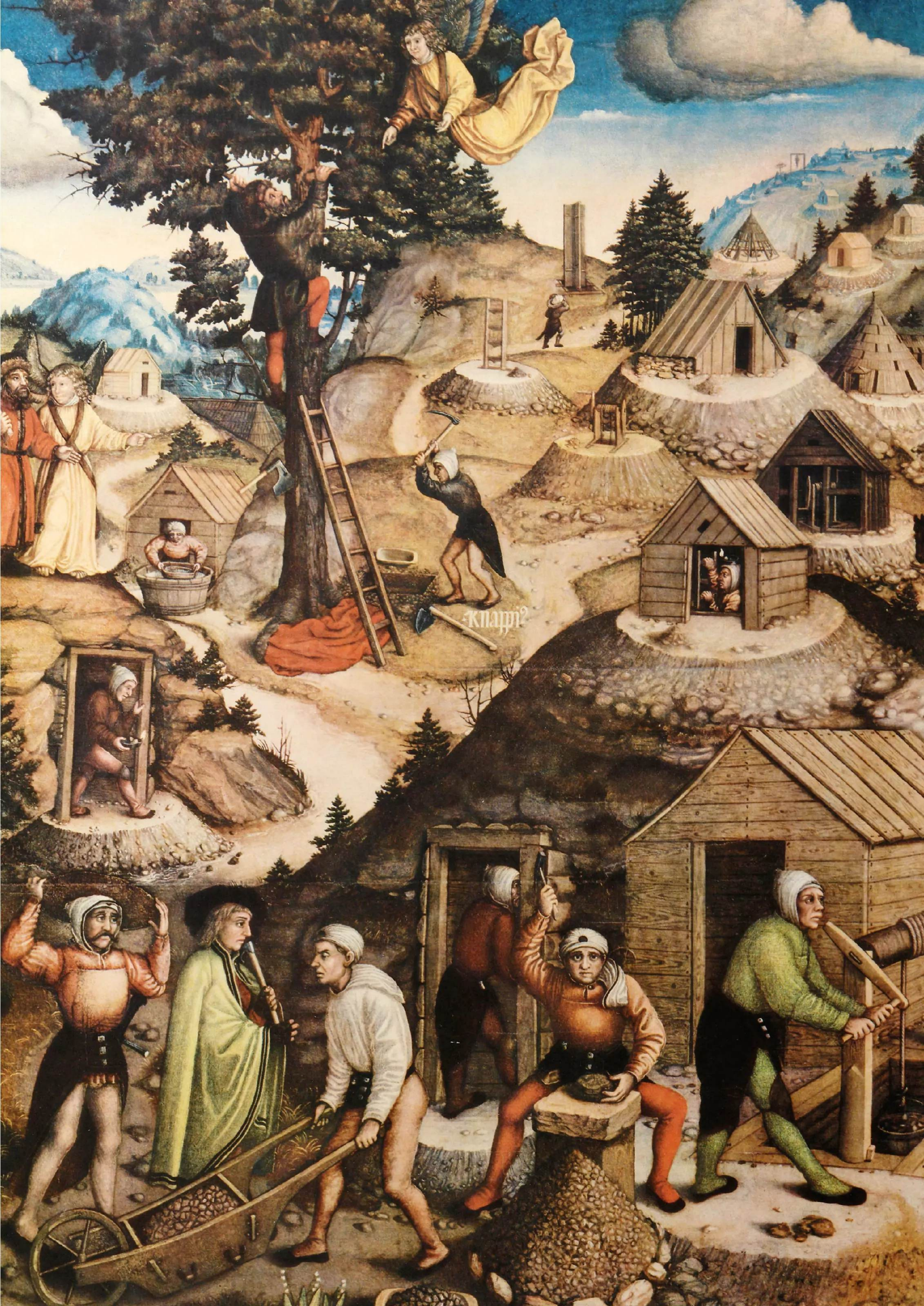
BELOW LEFT: Naila's coat of arms. **FACING PAGE**: Mining activities in the Ore Mountains shown on the 1521 St Annen-Kirche altar, Annaberg, Germany.

In this article, I'll focus on one specific aspect: the association between the *Wilder Mann* in Germany and mining.

MINING TOWNS AND MYTHS

Naila is a mining area, with a history of copper and iron extraction going back at least 1,000 years. The area saw two peaks of industry, the first between 1470 and 1630, the second in the 18th century. In this part of Franconia, the *Wilder Mann* is intrinsically linked with the mining industry. While the origin of its use is hard to pin down, two mines in the area are called *Wilder Mann* (upper and lower), and it's possible that the combination of forests and metal ore leads to this association.[6]

Located on the border between Poland and the German state of Brandenburg, the town of Bad Muskau takes its name from the Sorbian dialect. While one explanation suggests the name is taken from the nearby swamp called Muzak, another suggests it comes from the Sorbian for Wild Man. The town's coat of arms shows a *Wilder Mann* with wreaths of leaves around his head and waist.[7] Eschewing the usual arboreal accessories, the Bad Muskau Wild Man carries a gold sword in one hand and an antler in the other. The current design dates back to the 15th century. As the 'Bad' prefix suggests, the town is now a spa, but it too has a history of mining dating back at least to the 16th century. The first written evidence of alum mining is from 1573. Although the operation of an iron hammer in the area only dates to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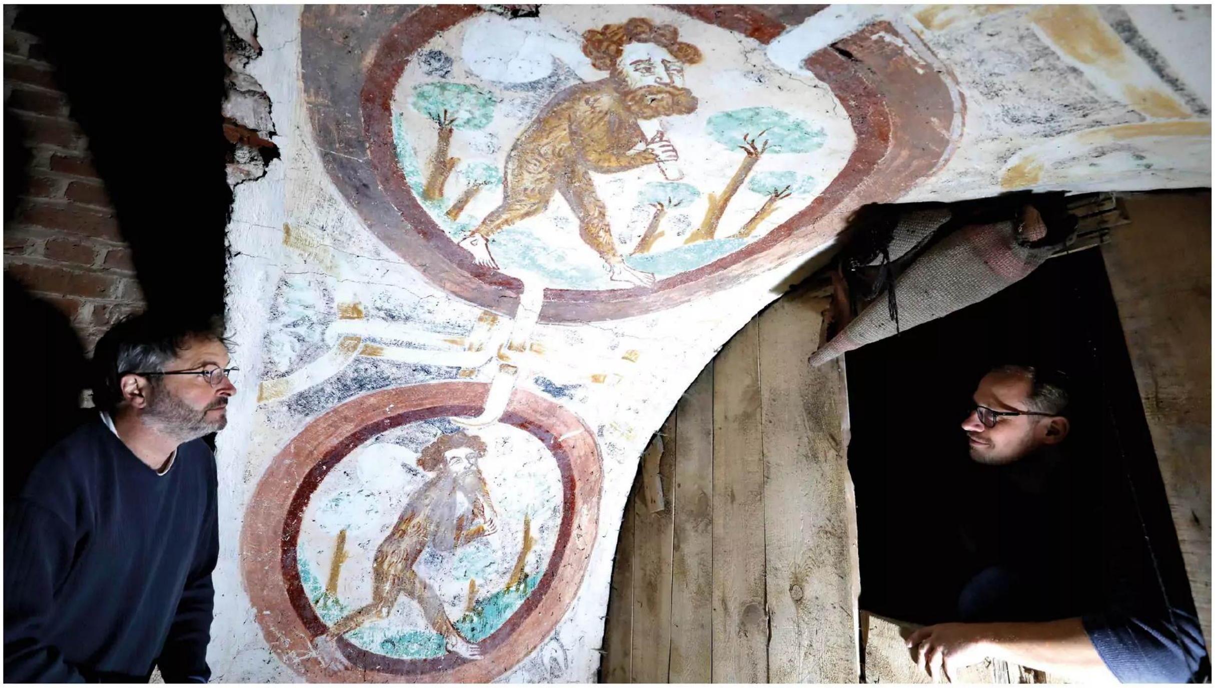


DPA PICTURE ALLIANCE / ALAMY

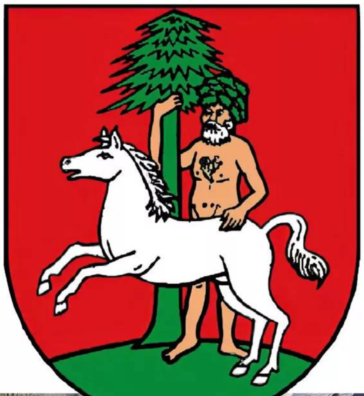
ABOVE: 15th century Wall paintings of the Wilder Mann discovered during work in a church in Krenz in 2019. **BELOW:** The Wildemann coat of arms. **BOTTOM:** Traces of Wildemann's mining heritage can still be seen in the town today.

the 19th century, the town website explains that iron mining and processing has a long history due to the presence of bog iron deposits.

The small town of Bad Harzburg is also now known as a spa town. However, the settlement has a long history as a mining area, and once again the coat of arms shows a *Wilder Mann*, this time stood atop an open castle gate, once again wearing a foliate apron and crown, and holding a fir tree.[8] Salt mining in the area dates back to the 16th century, with ironstone mining beginning in the 19th century, which is roughly contemporary with the creation of the coat of arms.

Gehren also has a later date for its coat of arms, 1855, and it also has a local history of iron mining, dating back to the 15th century. However, in this case a little caution might be necessary, as sources suggest the tree represents the timber trade and the presence of the *Wilder Mann* is an acknowledgement of the Schwarzburg-Sondershausen principality that features a *Wilder Mann* as a shield holder on its coat of arms.[9]

THE WILD MAN HAD A BEAR OVER HIS SHOULDER, WHICH HE THREW AT THE KNIGHT



LOSCH / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

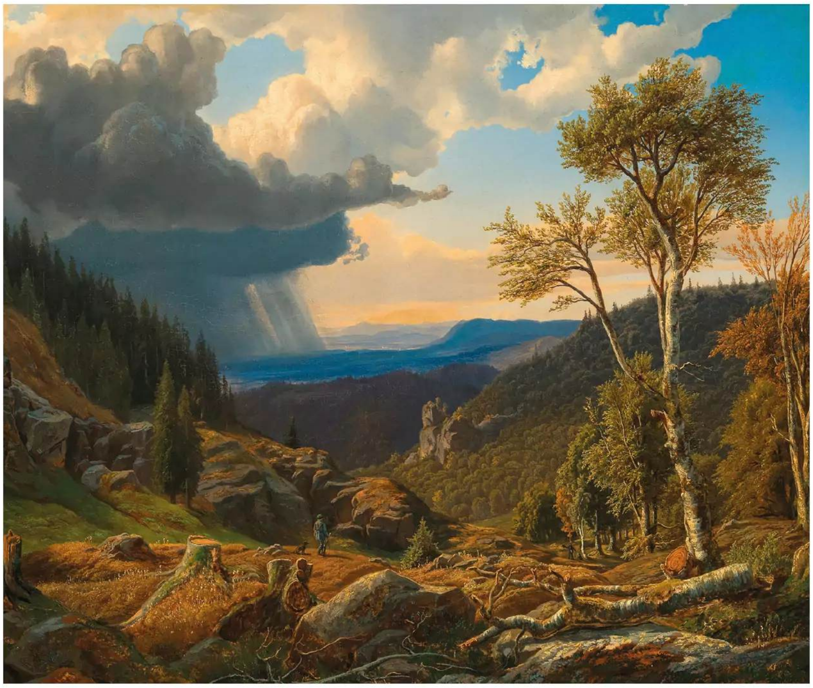
THE WILD MAN OF WILDEMANN

Wildemann is a town located in Upper Saxony with a population of just over 1,000 and was founded in the 16th century by miners from the Ore Mountains that run along the border between Saxony and the Czech Republic.

Sent by the Guelph Dukes to expand the mines of the Harz region, the miners encountered a *Wilder Mann* and his female companion. He is described as covering his modesty with fir branches, bark, and a type of moss called Witch's Herb (it is not clear if this is meant to be *Circaea lutetiana*, the plant now known as *Hexenkraut* in German or broad-leaved enchanter's nightshade in English).

The miners attempted to capture the Wild Man, eventually shooting him and bringing him in. Once in captivity, he refused to speak or work, and only showed any interest in the ore deposits near where he was found. After the miners brought the *Wilder Mann* to the Duke, the unfortunate captive died of his wounds. Following his death large silver ore deposits were found.[10] A second version of the story says the *Wilder Mann* was discovered by the Knight Klaus, who first encountered the *Wilder Frau* (and fled in fear). The Wild Man had a bear over his shoulder, which he threw at the knight. Following this encounter, Klaus helped the *Wilder Mann* through life, and significant deposits of silver ore were found where the *Wilder Mann* had his cave. The Wild Man had a significant impact on the town and its folklore, with the town hall being located on the site of his cave. He is also said to have fathered several children, with many people in the area supposedly descended from him.[11]

As well as giving his name



ABOVE: The Ore Mountains in a mid-19th century painting by Anton Liehm. It has been suggested that the traditions linking the Wilder Mann to mining were brought here by miners migrating from the Harz.

to the town, the *Wilder Mann* is also represented on the coat of arms, holding a tree and resting a hand on a white horse. He is wearing the now familiar crown of leaves, though his midriff is obscured by the horse so it's difficult to determine whether his foliate clothing continues.[12]

The link with the Ore Mountains is of particular interest. The Naila Museum notes that a tract of forest lying to the north of the Alte Geyerische Straße is named 'Wilder Mann'. This is also related to 16th century mining and was considered to be an area that could not be mined due to water ingress and other obstacles. A wooden carving of the *Wilder Mann* marks this location, and has been replaced seven times since the 1870s.[13]

Schneeberg, also in the Ore Mountains, had mines called 'Wilder Mann' and 'Wilder Frau', and a lead mine in Meissen was similarly named.

There seems to be a definite link between mining and the *Wilder Mann* in the Ore Mountains, and it might be this was transmitted to the Harz area when the miners moved to look for new ore sources.

So, how does Naila fit into this picture? There's strong evidence from the coat of arms described in 1454, as well as a mention in 1471 by Michael Staud of Nürnberg of mining works near Naila called 'Wilder Mann'. These both predate the founding of the town of Wildemann, so are suggestive of another source. The southern end of the Ore Mountains is only 115km (71 miles) from Naila (by comparison, Wildemann is approximately 270km (168 miles) from the mountain range), so it's possible that there was an earlier transmission from miners connecting the search for ore to wild men.

FROM THE HARZ TO THE ORE MOUNTAINS

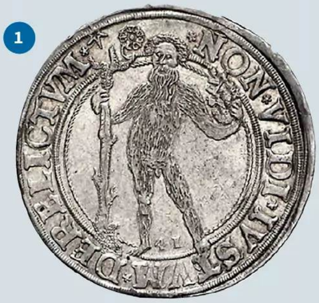
One clear link between the *Wilder Mann* and mining is shown on the Thaler minted by Heinrich the Younger of Wolfenbüttel in 1539 at the Reichenberg mint. This coin shows the shaggy *Wilder Mann* completely naked, with a foliate crown, and a tree in his right hand. However, in his other hand he holds a piece of ore, called in German an *Erzstufe*.

The use of the *Wilder Mann* on coins persisted for many years. In discussing the history of his appearance on currency, Werner Gutbrod retells a slightly more nuanced version of the folklore.[14] In this version, the *Wilder Mann* was the guardian of the Harz Mountain silver treasures, and the miners believed that while he was alive he had rendered the ore veins unusable. While in captivity, the *Wilder Mann* constantly looked toward the veins, and on the day he was killed the first silver-rich veins were found.

Gutbrod also goes into some detail about the transmission of the story across the German landscape. He points out that Harz folklorists argue the Wild Man's association with mining originated in the mountains, whereas evidence seems to suggest it was brought to the Harz area from elsewhere. Gutbrod suggests miners from the Harz may have taken the story with them to the Ore Mountains when they migrated following the destruction of the royal mines at Rammelsberg, near Goslar, in the 12th

FERAL FINANCES

1



Cryptozoological coins are not unheard of – for example, Intaglio Mint have a range of coins featuring, among others, the Mongolian death worm and the Jersey Devil, and when the Royal Mint released their A-Z 10p coins in 2018, the L was represented by the Loch Ness Monster – but they are unusual in general currency.

The *Wilder Mann*, though, has a long history on German Thaler coins, starting in 1539 (1). While he has a fairly established form, the early coins show him with a number of accessories. The Lichttaler of 1569 (2) shows him holding a candlestick in his right hand, while the Brillentaler of 1588 (3) depicts him carrying a candlestick in his left hand, as well as a skull, an hourglass and a pair of glasses. By 1594, the *Wilder Mann* was shown more traditionally with his tree trunk proudly held in his right hand, and by 1600 he was taken over as the fixed image for the Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel mint in Zellerfeld (4), and soon after by the Andreasberg mint also. Into the 18th century, the Wilder Mann is portrayed in a variety of stances, normally alone and always holding a tree. For the numismatically inclined fortean, there is potential for a lovely collection.

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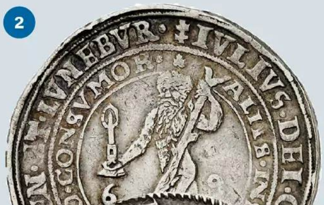

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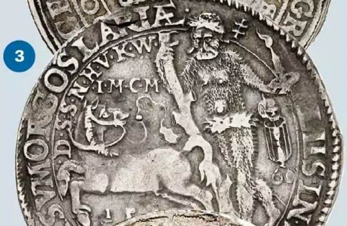

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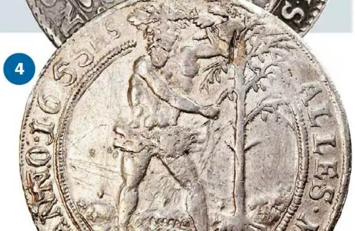
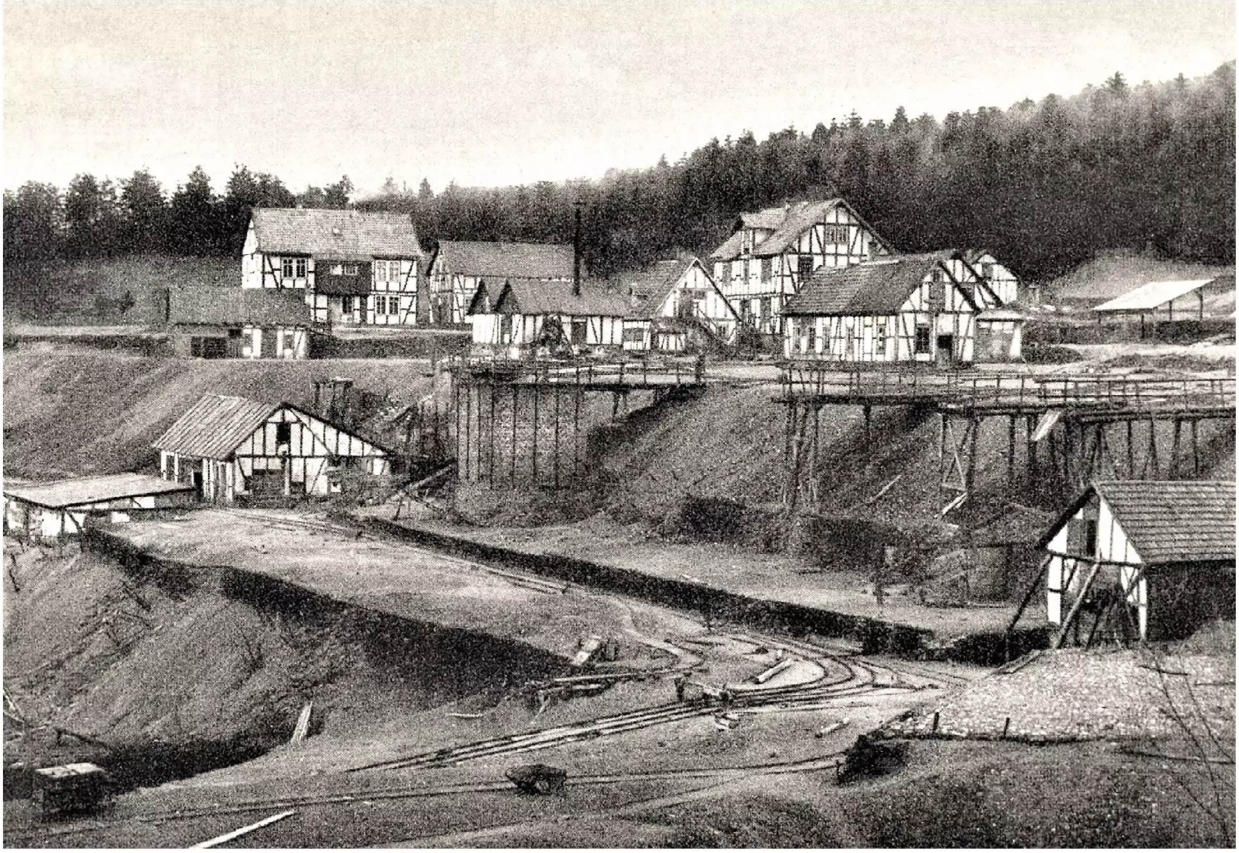




G GRUNDMANN COLLECTION

ABOVE: The Wilder Mann mine in Müsen photographed in 1910. **BELOW:** An unusual wooden Wild Man in the Geyer Forest – the seventh to be carved since the 1870s.

century. This migration led to the founding of Freiburg in the Ore Mountains and may well have brought the association of mining with the *Wilder Mann* that was transmitted back in the 16th century.

WILD MEN SANS FRONTIERES

While not in Germany, Montiggl lies in the German speaking Italian region of South Tyrol. Local stories tell of a ferocious Wild Man known as the *Montiggl Wilden*. While there are several stories about this particular *Wilder Mann*, one stands out. A group of people collecting firewood from the forest peeked into the wild man's hut. Inside, they found the small house empty, apart from a pit. Seeing no evidence of the occupant, they climbed down into it, and while they were inside, the pit began to spin, making the explorers dizzy, changing the walls until they shone with pure gold. They managed to climb up, but when they looked again the gold was gone. Again, we see a link between the *Wilder Mann* and mineral sources.[15]

So far, the primary example of a direct enounter with a Wild Man is in Wildemann, though there is a place lying far to the west that may provide another. The small town of Lasauvage lies in a narrow valley on the border between France and Luxembourg. The town takes its name from the valley, which in turn takes its name from the wild woman, or *La Femme Sauvage* who lived there. According to Nikolaus Gredt, writing in 1883, she lived in the valley towards the end of the 17th century. She is described as feeding on raw flesh, with a thick head of hair that reached to the ground, red-rimmed eyes like glowing coals, double rows of teeth, sharp claws and a voice like an owl's hoot. On her death, she was not accepted into Hell, as she was believed by the guardians of that place to be more beast than human, and was forced to ascend back to the surface, where she haunted the neighbourhood until banished beyond the sea by a pious hermit.[16]

SHE IS DESCRIBED AS FEEDING ON RAW FLESH, WITH A THICK HEAD OF HAIR AND SHARP CLAWS

KORA27 / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

For the purposes of this article, it's worth noting that Gredt emphasises that this was *before* the construction of the iron works in Lasauvage. However, there is historical evidence that by the 16th century there was a smithy with a water-powered hammer established on the river; it was in the 17th century that further works, along with a blast furnace, were established, first relying on high-quality ore gathered from the fields, before mining of minette ore began.

It's also worth pointing out that some of these locations are also near national borders, which can in themselves be highly contested areas in which strangers might be treated with suspicion and hostility. Lasauvage has the French/Luxembourg border passing through the town, Bad Muskau lies on the German/Polish border, the Ore Mountains lie along the German/Czech border, and Naila itself is only 40km (25 miles) from the same border.

An interesting side note comes from research by Hans-Jörg Vogel. In German half-timbered houses there is a particular arrangement of beams called a *Wilde Mann*.[17] With diagonal beams stretching down like legs, and similar beams stretching up like arms, these figures were thought to be connected to weather gods, able to warn of storms as well as protecting the houses from lightning and evil enemies. While the connection to mining might be pure supposition, the technology of building wooden supports in mines and for timber houses is similar. The houses discussed are in the Meuselwitz area, which has been associated with lignite mining since the 17th century, so it is plausible the term was transferred from one to the other.

CONCLUSION

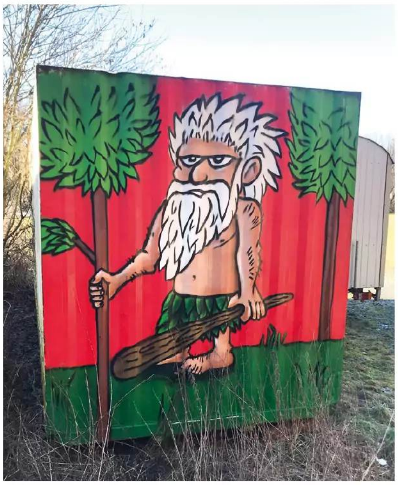
As mentioned above, the use of the Wild Man is complex, with many different explanations for their occurrence across Western Europe. In Germany alone there are many possible Wild Man sources, whether folkloric, ecclesiastical, or connected with nobility. Yet, I think there is a thread running through the occurrences of the *Wilder Mann* (and in some cases the *Wilder Frau*) connecting these creatures to mining.

Iconography rarely associates the Wild Man directly with mining, though it is clear that there is an association in the naming conventions of mining levels, for example in Kreuztal,[18] Müsen,[19] and Plettenberg,[20] where the *Wilde Mann* copper pyrite mining pit began in the 15th century. Whether the folklore fed into the naming, or the naming drove the folklore is unclear.

Probably the strongest connection is via the town of Wildemann, and the description of an actual encounter, the relationship of the captured *Wilder Mann* with the mineral deposits and the subsequent discovery of rich veins following his death.

It's tempting to be reductive and argue that the *Wilder Mann* in these settings merely represents the interface between the wild and the civilised, but the stories and connections seem far too specific for that to be the case. In some areas there does seem to be a genuine link between the idea of a *Wilder Mann* (or *Frau*) and the mining of minerals, possibly connected with the mining communities of the Ore Mountains and, before that the Harz region.

KASSANDRO / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



STEVE TOASE

ABOVE: A bronze *Wilder Mann* outside Wildemann's old town hall. **LEFT:** A contemporary graffiti art representation of the *Wilder Mann* in Naila.

Special thanks to Hans-Jörg Vogel and Ulrich Magin for their help with this article.

STEVE TOASE is a regular contributor to FT. Born in North Yorkshire, he lives in Germany. His debut short story collection *To Drown in Dark Water* is now out from Undertow Publications: www.undertowpublications.com/shop/to-drown-in-dark-water.

NOTES

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THE HAUNTINGS OF WILLIAM STEVENS

ROB GANDY heads into the heart of the Black Country and visits the town of Tipton – once the 'Venice of the Midlands' and a crucible of the Industrial Revolution – to listen to one man's stories of a lifetime of ghostly encounters...

TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY STOCK

Regular readers will be well aware that I like to collect first and second-hand testimonies of people's strange experiences, and collate them into articles for *FT* and occasionally the *Ghost Club Journal*. [1] These can arise from contacts made at various events, but sometimes they just come 'out of the blue'. This was the case when I was chatting with a very good friend of mine, William Stevens (pseudonym), who I have known for many years and see on a regular basis. Somehow one of our conversations got around to my talks about phantom hitchhikers and road ghosts. It was at this point that William told me about a range of weird things that had happened to him personally. I had found myself in a similar situation when preparing my article *The Hauntings of David Barton* (**FT371:40-44**) – dealing with stories from one individual about a series of diverse events experienced over a lifetime that cannot be readily explained. I have total confidence that William is genuine and sincere about his stories, so here they are...

A Tipton Ghost Story

Many years ago in the summer of 1980 or 1981, when he was 16 or 17 years old, William had a girlfriend who lived in Tipton, in the West Midlands, in one of what are locally referred to as the 'railway houses'. These are terraced houses that are deep and narrow and have three floors.

At one point, on the first occasion that William visited her house, he inevitably had a call of nature and asked his girlfriend where to find the toilet. She told him that it was upstairs on the third floor and gave directions. But when he got to the third floor landing he realised that he could not remember exactly which door she had said. Therefore he took a guess and opened one of the doors, only to find that he had stepped into one of the bedrooms where an elderly lady with tidy grey hair was sitting in front of the window (which overlooked the rear of the house) reading a Mills & Boon book.

BLACK COUNTRY IMAGES / ALAMY

She had a number of such books on an old-fashioned extendable table in front of her, together with a cup of tea. She was wearing a lavender cardigan and a skirt, with beads around her neck. Embarrassed, William apologised and explained that he was looking for the toilet. As he recalls, she seemed to look towards him but not actually at him – as if she was seeing someone else who was also in the room. In addition, he was aware of a strange chemical-like smell as if something was burning. He withdrew and found that the toilet was behind the next door.

When he returned downstairs his girlfriend asked if he had found the toilet. He said that he had, but that he had first inadvertently gone into a bedroom where he had interrupted an old lady reading her book. Upon hearing this, his girlfriend went white, and asked him which room he was referring to. She then produced a photo of five elderly women and asked William if the lady he had seen was on it. He immediately indicated the woman. His girlfriend then became very emotional, as she explained that the room that he had stumbled into was her sister's room, but that it had previously been occupied by her elderly grandmother who had died two years previously. The lady William had pointed out on the photo was her grandmother.

The two of them went back up to the bedroom. It was empty. There was the same chair and table that he had seen, but no books and no sign of anyone, and the strange smell had gone. William and his girlfriend were the only people in the house and neither could explain what William had seen.

Phantom Fingers

One fine day a few years earlier, in the mid-1970s, William and his friend Joe decided to explore the Beehive pub, near his home, which had long since closed its doors. The pub was empty and boarded up, but the two lads realised that by walking across a plank from its back wall over the yard they could reach a door with its bottom half missing; by bending down they would be able to get through the gap and into the building – which is what they did.

> JOE CRIED OUT AND TOLD WILLIAM THAT SOMETHING HAD GRABBED HIS SHOULDER HARD AND PULLED HIM BACK

They proceeded to look around the pub, first downstairs in the bars, and then upstairs around the bedrooms. There wasn't really anything of note – just empty, run-down rooms. Deciding that they had seen enough, William began to walk down the stairs. Joe followed, but after a couple of steps he suddenly fell back on to the landing. Startled, Joe cried out and told William that something had grabbed his shoulder hard and pulled him back – yet there was no one and nothing to be seen. Joe's shoulder hurt, so he pulled up his T-shirt; both of them could see what looked like three large red finger-marks where he felt he had been grabbed. The T-shirt material showed no sign of having been touched, such as a tear or pull. Needless to say, the two boys decided to vacate the premises as quickly as possible. Fearing that whatever had attacked Joe would be chasing them, they crossed the plank on to the back wall and then pulled it up so that nothing could follow them.

That something had happened to Joe, and that he hadn't simply slipped and fallen, was evidenced by the fact that it took many weeks for the 'finger-marks' bruising to fade away.

Black Bird

In 1979 or 1980, William headed over to Tipton Park with a large group of teenage friends for a game of football. This was a kick-about with jumpers for goalposts and probably 20-30 players. William found himself in goal, and so he inevitably sometimes watched what was going on off the pitch when the ball was towards the opponents' end. At one point he found himself watching a very large black bird fly over the area; he cannot remember whether it was a crow or a rook. There was a courting couple serenely walking along hand-in-hand, but when the black bird flew over them they immediately started to argue with each other, quite animatedly. This continued

TOP: Narrowboats transporting coal along the Tipton Canal on a foggy morning in 1953. **ABOVE**: Tipton's Beehive pub, long since demolished, where William and his friend had a spooky experience in the mid-1970s.

a little while as the bird was above their heads, and they only stopped when it flew away.

The black bird then flew over some of the football players, who – to William's amazement –also started to argue with each other when the bird was overhead. Again, they stopped arguing when it moved away. Naturally, this piqued William's curiosity and he continued to watch the bird as it eventually flew down to the ground. It 'bounced' forward a few yards, in the way that corvids move on the ground, and stopped. Black smoke then started to ooze out of the bird, primarily from its beak, and it keeled over dead.

William turned his attention back to the football, but when the game had finished he went over to have a look at the black bird. It was definitely deceased, but what surprised him was that it now looked like a bird that had been dead for several days.

DAN LAZAR / UNSPLASH

17th Century Phantom

Many years ago, William found himself being dragged along by his then girlfriend to a psychic fair in a large Tudor house in Wolverhampton. This suggests that it was either Moseley Old Hall or Wightwick Manor (both National Trust properties); William cannot remember the name of the venue, but the former is the most likely. There were lots of stalls, covering the sorts of things that would be expected at such an event. His girlfriend was very enthusiastic, and William spent most of his time idling between the stalls and watching people. At one point he was looking for the toilets and came into a corridor where he saw a man wearing 17th century costume, a typical 'Cavalier'-period look, although not a soldier. William assumed that the man was dressed up as part of the event.

William saw the man again, noticing that he was just walking around the venue and not really engaging with people, which William had assumed would be his purpose. Completely puzzled, and pointing at the man, he asked his girlfriend "What is that bloke supposed to be doing?" This rather unnerved his girlfriend, who said that there was no one there. At this point, William saw the man look directly at him, as if realising that William could see him. The man then walked past them and around a corner. By now, William was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery and followed the man. But when he turned the same corner, he found only a bricked up doorway.

BLACK SMOKE THEN STARTED TO OOZE OUT OF THE BLACK BIRD AND IT KEELED OVER DEAD

Scaredy Dog!

It was one Christmas day back in the 1990s and William was with his ex-girlfriend Katy (pseudonym); the relationship was never going to last because he supported Wolverhampton Wanderers and she supported the 'deadly enemy' West Bromwich Albion! Katy had two dogs – a Rottweiler and a Rhodesian Ridgeback – and they decided it would be a good idea to drive out to Cannock Chase to take them for a walk. However, when they arrived in the car park William and Katy had a blazing row. This resulted in them heading off in opposite directions; Katy with the Rhodesian Ridgeback and William with Rosey the Rottweiler. After a while, William found himself entering a clearing, with the edge of the woods being about 30 yards ahead. As they moved forward, Rosey suddenly stopped in her tracks and started growling at something ahead of them, baring her teeth. Despite William trying to usher her forward she would not move and seemed focused on the trees. It was then that William saw what looked like a pale young girl with long dark hair and wearing a long white dress appear from behind one of the trees. She seemed hunched to one side, but whether this was how she carried herself or the result of some deformity William could not tell. Rosey became even more agitated.

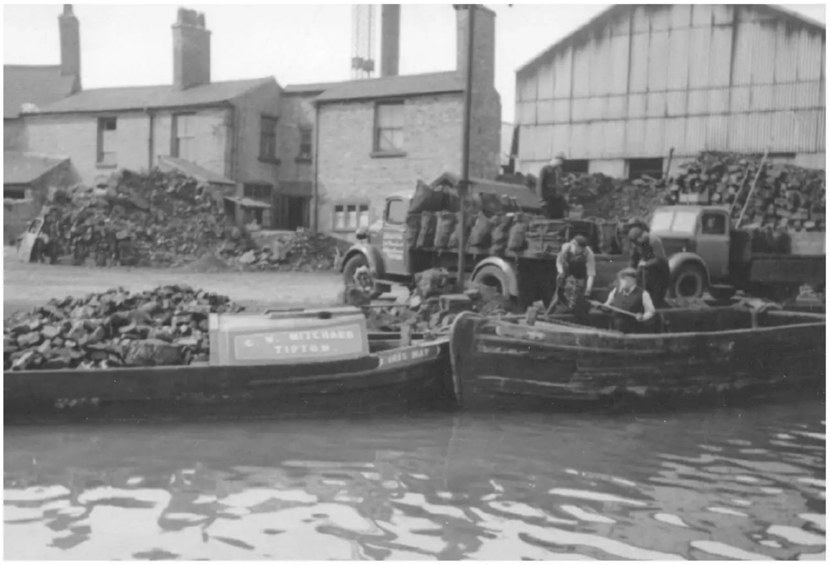
At the point that the girl was in full view and starting to move towards them, William decided that discretion was the better part of valour and turned and ran. Rosey similarly turned on her heels and the two of them left the clearing and whatever they had seen well behind them. When they raced into the car park Katy was already there and had the back of the car open; Rosey did not pause – she ran to the car and jumped straight into the back and cowered. What did William see that Christmas day? We will never know and all he can say is that the 'girl' did not look 'right', and he does not believe it was a real person.

Andy Warhol in Edinburgh?

On a trip to Edinburgh, William and a girlfriend were taking a leisurely, touristy walk around its streets. As can be inferred from the above two stories, William is a bit of a 'people-watcher'. At one point, he spotted a man who he can only describe as an Andy Warhol look-alike – he had longish

MIKE PEEL / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

ABOVE: Moseley Old Hal, the probable site of William's 1990s Christmas Day encounter with a mysterious gentleman in 17th century attire – disappearing re-enactor or the ghost of a local Cavalier?



CANAL AND RIVER TRUST

blonde hair, which looked dyed, and wore a black polo-neck jumper; he certainly stood out. William would see 'Andy' turn down a street not far ahead of him; but when he reached the street and looked along it there was no sign of him. This happened on several occasions; and where 'Andy' would appear next seemed to make little logistical sense, given where William had last seen him. Most disconcerting was when 'Andy' walked past William and his girlfriend, and then moments later reappeared ahead of them! William finally asked his girlfriend what she thought about this strange-looking man and his appearing-disappearing act… only to be told that she hadn't seen anyone fitting that description.

Tipton Time-slip

On the clear, light summer evening of Monday 22 July 2019 William had arranged to meet a friend in the car park of Tipton's Neptune Health Park. Arriving first, he rested on a metal bollard to the right of the main entrance, which afforded a view directly down the pathway between the Health Park and the neighbouring building towards the canal. He checked the time on his mobile phone: it was 7.10pm.

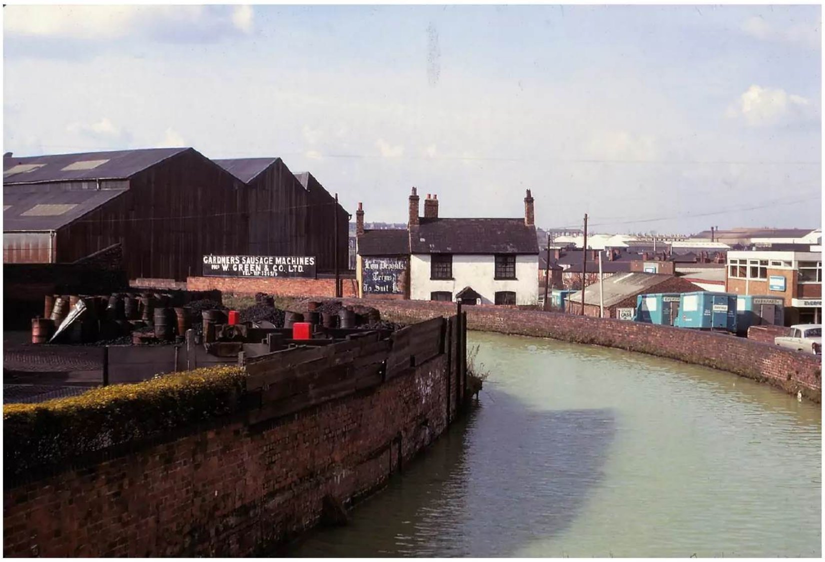
As he looked down the pathway he saw a man and woman walking across the far end, with the woman pushing a pram. They came from the right, as though they had walked down from the bridge over the canal on Owen Street. They were probably no more than 10 yards away, and William could see them clearly. The pram was baby-pink, and was an old-style rectangular 'box-type' pram. But rather than seeing a baby inside, William could readily see that it was full of coal!

The man, who was closest, looked as though he was in his late 50s or early 60s, with white hair. He was wearing a large grey flat cap, a white silk scarf and a dark blue, heavy worsted suit of a pre-WWII style, which appeared too big for him. What struck William was the man's really well-polished black boots – as though he had been a soldier. The woman seemed to be in her late 30s or early 40s. William thought the pair looked like a father and daughter, rather than husband and wife. She was taller, with her shoes built up; although one heel looked as though it was worn down, or had lost a bit. She was wearing a sky-blue/grey coat of post WWII style, with what seemed to be the bottom of a pinafore hanging below the hem at the front. She was quite thin, but William could not see her features because she had a scarf wrapped around her head.

Neptune
Health Park

The couple were not talking, but both were smoking. They walked at normal speed across the end of the pathway, and disappeared from view where the side entrance of the Health Park is situated. William now realised that this was a bit strange and went down the path to the side entrance, only to find that the door was locked; he pushed against it to check. It had only taken him 15-20 seconds to get to the side entrance and there was absolutely nowhere that the man and woman could have gone without him seeing them. They had simply vanished into thin air.

The whole episode had taken no more than a minute, and, thinking about it, William did not recall any sound coming from the couple or the pram. Historically, the coal and ironstone below its surface made Tipton a centre for collieries and iron works, and the network of canals led to its being known as the 'Venice of the Midlands'.[2] The Neptune Health Park is built on the site of the Neptune Forge where Joseph Wright & Co. manufactured chains, anchors, boilers and forgings for world markets from 1851 to 1994.[3] Immediately adjacent to Neptune Forge, on the sharp bend of the canal – the direction the couple had come from – was CW Mitchard Coal Merchants, who were there up to the mid-1970s.[4] Therefore people collecting (or pilfering) coal for domestic use would likely have been a common sight in that area in bygone days. Had William witnessed a time-slip?



KEITH HODGKINS

TOP: The yard of CW Mitchard Coal Merchants photographed in 1956. **ABOVE:** The site of the old coalyard on the bend of the canal photographed by Keith Hodgkins in 1975. **ABOVE CENTRE:** The site of the old Neptune Forge is commemorated in the name of the Neptune Health Park, the location of William's possible time-slip.

TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY STOCK

ABOVE: The overgrown banks of the Birmingham Wolverhampton Canal at Factory Locks, Tipton. **BELOW:** Beehive Walk, where William ecountered his ghostly cousin.

Ghostly Cousin

William also told me about an experience that he had in 2015 when he was returning home on the night of 14 April. He had been dropped off in Tipton by a friend, after travelling to Middlesbrough to watch a football match. The weather was cold and clear. As he walked the last 200 yards or so home he crossed the bridge over the canal and along a path by Tipton Green Methodist Church. He checked his mobile phone and saw that it was 3am. He then looked up Beehive Walk and saw his cousin George sitting on the canal wall about halfway up. William readily recognised him, under the light of the Moon; he was wearing a white open-neck shirt, a small jerkin and trousers. He was smoking and had a bottle of beer in his hand, but William says that he seemed "out of it". William watched for about 30 seconds and then his cousin stood up and walked down New Cross Street towards their grandmother's house.

Now William admits that he had never got on with his cousin, who was nine years older than him. Another reason why William did not cross the road to join his cousin, or call out to him, was the fact that said cousin had been dead for over five years. George had been found hanged in their grandmother's house in August 2009; while suicide was suspected, the coroner returned an open verdict. George had lived in the house with his mother (William's aunt) – the grandparents having died several years before – but she had been found dead (of natural causes) on Christmas morning in 2007. William understands that the clothes that he was wearing when he died were the same clothes that William had seen him wearing that night.

HE DOESN'T CLAIM TO HAVE ANY SORT OF SPECIAL GIFT AND HIS EXPERIENCES HAVE OCCURRED RARELY

BEEHIVE WALK

STEPHEN MCKAY / GEOGRAPH

Final Thoughts

As stated above, I have total confidence in William's sincerity. That he seems to see people, or things, that others cannot see might have some folk mark him down as having a degree of psychic capability (whatever that might mean). He himself does not claim to have any sort of special 'gift', and his experiences have occurred rarely over his lifetime. He is simply genuinely puzzled by them.

In my conclusions to *The Hauntings of David Barton* I highlighted that we are limited by our personal senses, and all we can do is be honest and truthful. I continue to recommend that anyone who has similarly odd experiences should write them down 'for the record', as they will otherwise be forgotten or become distorted over time before evaporating into the ether. Collating recorded experiences might, or might not, eventually yield patterns that suggest insights; but it is certainly fun and intriguing. As ever, *FT's* own *It Happened To Me* section is the perfect outlet for such purposes.

NOTES

1 www.ghostclub.org.uk/newsletters.htm

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4 Tipton Civic Society, personal communication 20 Aug 2019.

➻ **ROB GANDY** is a Visiting Professor at Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University and a regular contributor to FT. A lifelong fortean, he has eclectic interests in all things weird, including phantom hitchhikers, ghosts, strange sports and folk customs, time slips and synchronicities.

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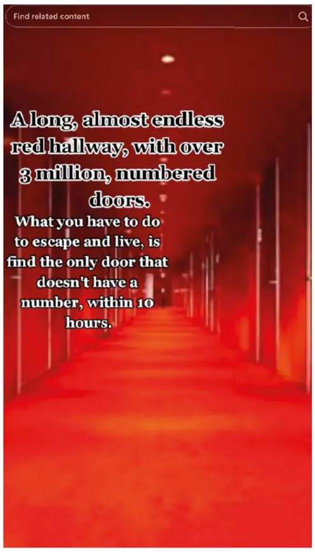
F74, Momo and the Skibidi Toilet

Should you be worried about Skibidi Toilet Syndrome? Might you never wake up if you take the F74 challenge? RYAN SHIRLOW attempts to explain the latest baffling memes invading your children's brains.

trying this trend..
F74
I'll post if I wake up. If I don't post then I'm in the hostpital or dead
879
313
97
25
explained in caption
See more

DRAMA KWEEN / YOUTUBE

ABOVE: YouTuber Drama Kween highlights the potential links between F74 and suicidal ideation in young children. **LEFT AND BELOW**: Images showing the F74 challenge or "Floor 74" curse from TikTok videos.



A long, almost endless red hallway, with over 3 million, numbered doors.

What you have to do to escape and live, is find the only door that doesn't have a number, within 10 hours.

As a father, I am used to dealing with difficult questions. Eight-year-old Alice might suddenly ask "What is sex protection?" or "How does a scorpion kill a human? Can I watch it on YouTube?" But I'll admit I was underprepared for: "If you rub out an F74 curse, does that stop it from coming true, or can it actually set it off?"

"*Well…* some curses could be triggered by touching or trying to remove them," I started unhelpfully. "But what does an F74 curse do?"

"It traps you in your dreams," Alice replied matter-of-factly, "and you can't get out until you find a door marked F74."

It turns out this afternoon's playground dare had been inspired by videos posted on the Chinese social media app TikTok throughout 2022.[1] As the US edition of the *Sun* newspaper summarises: "The F47 or Floor 47 is an alleged Japanese trend… the participant is required to write F74 on their wrist with a red marker pen before falling asleep… they will wake up in a long dark hallway that has multiple doors… it's imperative that challengers go through the right door – marked F74 – in order to escape the nightmare… If a challenger fails to find the door within 10 hours… they will be taken to a white room by a demonic creature with no escape."

A quick search online reveals some minor variations on the theme.[2] A nice touch is that one of the original posters reportedly locked their account so that they would still appear to be trapped in their dream.

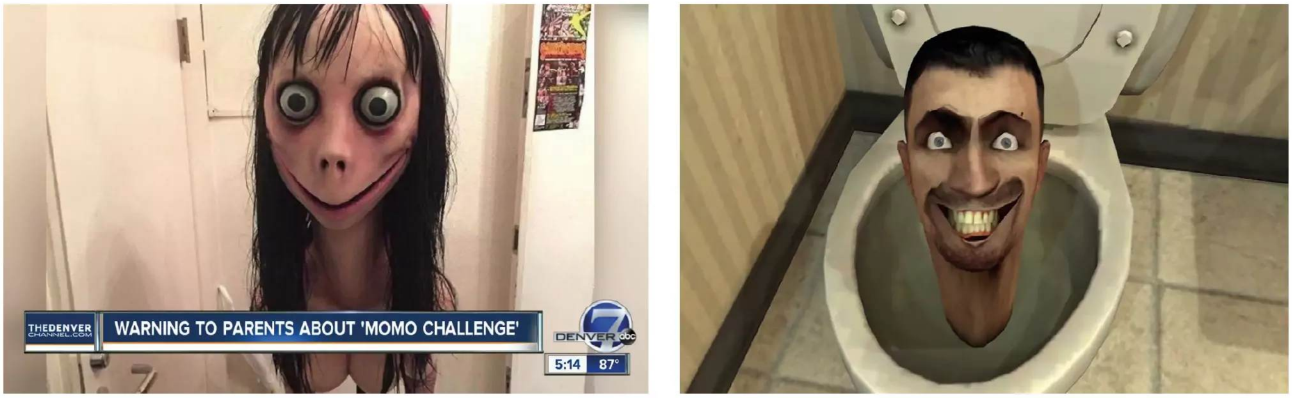
Other than that, the videos don't make much effort to be convincing; the floating text giving the instructions reminded me of 1980s roleplaying computer games, and bleepy background music (a lo-fi take on the HAL 9000 favourite "Daisy, Daisy" for example) adds to the feel.

Challengers must go through the right door in order to escape the nightmare

"Well that doesn't sound *too* bad," I reassured Alice. "And some people believe that if you bless or curse someone, you'll get it back three times in return." This, I explained, was the 'Rule of Three'.[3] Alice and I agreed that her friend, who had actually drawn the curses, would now need to find *three* doors, one each with an F, a 7 and a 4 in order to escape. This folkish logic had an immediate appeal: whatever might happen to Alice, her friend was in for something even worse.

Of course, nothing untoward happened that night and when Alice met all her friends in the playground the next morning her initial fears turned to disgust. Applying sound empirical logic, she declared that "It must be nonsense" and refused to discuss the matter further.

We'd had a near miss. In her online discussion of the craze, YouTuber *Drama Kween* highlights some rather more worrying behaviour



DAFUQ!?BOOM / YOUTUBE

ABOVE LEFT: Momo was the star of an earlier viral Internet challenge and subsequent media scare. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Skibidi Toilet; the latest baffling meme to have taken the Internet by storm. **BELOW**: My nephew was unable to resist building his own 'Skibidi Toilet' out of the boxes of discarded Christmas presents.

RYAN SHIRLOW

from others, including a number of young children not much older than Alice posting that they would take the F74 challenge as a way to escape from or end their unhappy lives.[4] There's a clear visual reference to this in the red lettering cutting across the inside of the children's wrists.

While there is no evidence that anyone has actually died as a result of the F74 dare, this sadly cannot be said of other viral Internet crazes, for example the irresponsible "blackout challenge" that has encouraged children to inadvertently strangle themselves.[5]

A comment posted under Kween's video further suggests that some users may experience genuine nightmares simply by directing their thoughts so intensely upon F74. This type of dream, in which you become aware of yourself and your actions and can attempt to control them, is known as a lucid dream,[6] and there's a long history of efforts to stimulate them, through meditation, flashing lights [7] and recreational drugs.

The *Sun* article references a very similar "690452 challenge" from the previous year. I'd also draw a connection, via the thankfully unsubstantiated link to childhood suicides, to the earlier 'Momo' craze, which also featured elements from Japan (see **FT379:17**). That country has become the perennial source cited, accurately or otherwise, for much online insanity. (I imagine the authentic Japanese characters for 'Floor 74' were too difficult to reproduce for western TikTok users!)

Interest in Momo only took off in the UK after the killjoys in the Police Service of Northern Ireland foolishly issued an *official* warning about the grotesque but ultimately harmless imagery that was circulating on children's phones (in fact, a cropped picture of an avant-garde Japanese sculpture).[8]

Something similar happened during my own childhood, when Presbyterian teachers tried to clamp down on a feverish obsession with leprechauns that gripped a Christian field trip to the Mourne Mountains (see **FT338:54-55**) Typically, such efforts prove counterproductive.

However, by addressing F74 as a learning opportunity to explore curses and Internet crazes with my own daughter, I rendered it profoundly boring and she soon lost interest.

Stop press! As I write this, my five-year-old nephew Cameron has just fallen victim to the very latest "Skibidi Toilet" meme,[9] set in a nightmare world of anthropomorphic bog-monsters created by YouTube animator Alexey Gerasimov (AKA *DaFuq!?Boom!*).

The effects seem to include an insatiable desire to chant "Skibidi Toilet" over and over, driving anyone within earshot to distraction, drawing endless pictures of the bizarre characters and building them out of Lego. The poor little fellow eventually constructed a life-sized cardboard horror-commode out of the boxes of his abandoned Christmas presents (pictured at left).

Inevitably, this harmless fun hasn't stopped parenting sites writing worthy articles about the dangers of something called 'Skibidi Toilet Syndrome'; so far no children have been hurt or permanently possessed by the imaginary Skibidi parasite.

I predict a full recovery and a seamless segue into the next obsession in about six weeks' time.

NOTES

[1] www.the-sun.com/tech/6405431/f74-tiktok-trend-explained/

[2] www.the-sun.com/tech/6405431/f74-tiktok-trend-explained/

[3] www.the-sun.com/tech/6405431/f74-tiktok-trend-explained/

[4] https://youtu.be/X7h3srZSx2Y?feature=shared

[5] www.nytimes.com/2022/07/06/technology/tiktok-blackout-challenge-deaths.html

[6] For an interesting medical study of lucid dreaming, see: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2737577/

[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flicker_(film)

[8] www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/feb/28/viral-momo-challenge-is-a-malicious-hoax-say-charities

[9] www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/12/10/skibidi-toilets-you-tube-children-internet/viral-momo-challenge-is-a-malicious-hoax-say-charities

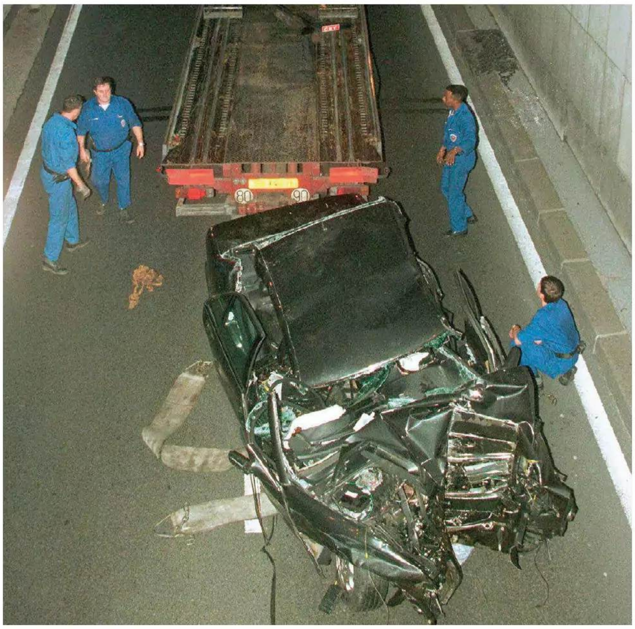
➾ **RYAN SHIRLOW** is a Northern Irish writer, musician and fortean. His latest production is the audio drama *The Automatic Leprechaun*, available at ryanshirlow.bandcamp.com.

An intellectual car crash

The death of Mohamed Al-Fayed closed down one strand of Diana conspiracy-mongering, but SD TUCKER recalls an even stranger theory about the Princess's death – that it was foreseen by Morrissey from The Smiths, following a 1980 UFO encounter.

On 30 August 2023, billionaire Egyptian-born former Harrods owner Mohamed Al-Fayed died at the age of 94, almost a year to the day following the 25th anniversary of the death of his playboy son Dodi Al-Fayed and his new lover Princess Diana in a Paris car crash on 31 August 1997. Deranged by grief, Mohamed insisted the 'accident' had been deliberately arranged as part of a conspiracy led by the Duke of Edinburgh to prevent a Muslim ever joining the Royal Family.

One man with an even stranger theory about Diana's death is David Alice, the Canadian creator of an extensive website, THE DIANA-MORRISSEY PHENOMENON, devoted to proving the disaster was uncannily predicted a decade beforehand in British indie band The Smiths' classic 1986 album *The Queen Is Dead* – the titular Queen being Diana herself who, while technically a mere princess, famously said she wished to be known as "The Queen of Hearts" during a self-serving pre-death TV interview. The Smiths' frontman was, of course, that professional Mancunian misery-guts Morrissey, a well-known vegan. Mr Alice is a vegan too, so one day in early 1997 he visited a second-hand shop in search of The Smiths' 1985 album *Meat Is Murder*, "but they only had *The Queen Is Dead*, so I bought that instead." Posterity should be grateful he did.



As soon as he heard news of Di and Dodi's deaths that August, Alice immediately recalled his new purchase's distinctly Ballardian song "There Is a Light That Never Goes Out", the lyrics of which detail a young couple fantasising about dying in a car crash during a date: "And in a darkened underpass/I thought 'Oh God, my chance has come at last!'/But then a strange fear gripped me, and I just couldn't ask…" Diana, of course, died in Paris's Pont d'Alma underpass, leading Alice to immediately feel "a spooky hunch" that the wider album which included this morbid little number was really one gigantic disguised musical foreshadowing of the fatal 1997 car-crash. The 'Light' of the song-title could only have been the Flame of Liberty monument located directly above the underpass in what is now the Place Diana – a light which would indeed never go out, as it was a stone statue of a flame, not a real, extinguishable one. Post-crash, this became a popular public shrine to the princess.[1]

Alice soon discovered "There Is a Light…" was the only Smiths single released exclusively in France, and that the photo on its parent album sleeve was of French actor Alain Delon, star of the 1986 movie *Le Passage*, in which Delon dies in a car-crash arranged by Death himself, following an elaborate conspiracy involving computers; no old-fashioned scythe needed. Alice also found *The Queen Is Dead* was named after a chapter in Hubert Selby's 1964 novel *Last Exit To Brooklyn* – and, when it crashed, Diana's car was heading towards the underpass' final exit to Paris's Avenue de New York. Plus, Elton John's hastily released mega-hit Diana tribute song recalled how she lived her life "like a candle in the wind" – another song on The Smiths' album being "Bigmouth Strikes Again", about a modern-day Joan of Arc, who also famously ended her life as a candle when being burned at the stake.

The 'Light' of the song title could only have been the Flame of Liberty

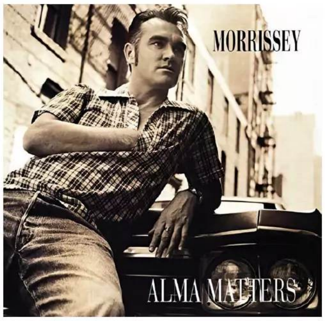
LEFT: The car in which Princess Diana was fatally injured on 31 August 1997 is removed from the Pont d'Alma underpass. **BELOW**: Did Morrissey really see it all coming? This photo of Alain Delon on the cover of *The Queen is Dead* is just one clue among many.

THE SMITHS
The Queen Is Dead

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The album's title track actually fantasises about Queen Elizabeth II dying after being "hemmed in like a boar between arches" by hunters, ending up as "Her Very Lowness with her head in a sling" (Morrissey notoriously dislikes the Royal Family). For Alice, Diana was also hunted to death like a boar by the paparazzi chasing her car – through an underpass held up by concrete arches. A previous celebrity car crash victim was Hollywood actress Jayne Mansfield, falsely reputed to have been decapitated during a 1967 collision and hence only identifiable by her large breasts – Jayne was the proto-Diana, who ended up with her "head in a sling". As Mansfield's ample assets imply, "Some Girls Are Bigger Than Others", the title of the 1986 album's final track, whose lyrics explain how: "As Antony said to Cleopatra/As he opened a crate of ale/'I have just discovered/Some girls are bigger than others/Some girls' mothers are bigger than other girls' mothers!'"

Actually, this is Morrissey's little joke about not noticing some women had bigger breasts than others until in his mid-20s, reputedly being gay and therefore perhaps wholly uninterested in such unnecessary protuberances.[2]



KEYSTONE PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: Morrissey atop a car on the cover of the 1997 single "Alma Matters". **BELOW**: Amanda Barry (*Corrie*'s Alma Halliwell) as Cleopatra. **ABOVE RIGHT**: A previous celebrity car crash in 1967 saw the death of Hollywood star Jayne Mansfield.

Alice disagrees, guessing the lyrics mean some girls are 'bigger' than others in the sense of being more famous, Diana being the planet's hottest female celebrity throughout 1997. Plus, the planet's most famous mother, Mother Teresa, died only a week later, on 5 September. The lyric about Antony and Cleopatra drinking ale can only be a reference to 1964 British comedy *Carry on Cleo*, Cleopatra being played by Amanda Barrie – a "perfect pun" for "A Man To Bury", namely Dodi Al-Fayed, also an Egyptian. The "crate of ale" nods to Henri Paul, Diana's drunk chauffeur. Also, in an old episode of *Burke's Law*, Jayne Mansfield played an exotic dancer named Cleo, who buries her pet snake in a place called 'ADIOS RESTLAND PET CEMETERY', an anagram of 'DIANA RESTS OLD PET CEMETERY' – and Princess Di is indeed buried in an old family dog-cemetery at her family's ancestral pile at Althorp.

Furthermore, a month before her death, Morrissey released a solo single, "Alma Matters" – and Diana crashed in the Pont d'Alma (Alice doesn't mention it, but we should note that Amanda Barrie also played Alma Halliwell in *Coronation Street*). On the single's sleeve, Morrissey puts one hand inside his shirt, like famous Frenchman Napoleon Bonaparte, and sits atop a car… the very same broad class of motor-vehicle Diana died in! Morrissey also once sang a duet with Siouxsie from Siouxsie and the Banshees – banshees being female harbingers of death. In 1991 Siouxsie, who once wore a Nazi armband for a daringly punkish photoshoot, released a single about Jayne Mansfield, and if you rotate and match up Siouxsie's sleeve-photo with one of Alain Delon from *The Queen Is Dead*, it is possible to make their conjoined limbs (very) vaguely resemble a swastika – which is where Adolf Hitler, and extraterrestrials, come into the picture …

Alice doubts Morrissey actively knew he was predicting Diana's death, being instead subconsciously programmed to do so by alien beings hiding inside the Moon (the traditional realm of the goddess Diana). As befits the singer of "Ouija Board, Ouija Board", Morrissey is a paranormal believer who claims to have encountered a half-naked phantom hitchhiker – a possible Moors Murders victim, no less – while driving (*in his car!!*) across Saddleworth Moor one evening in 1989. Also, according to comedian Bob Mortimer – co-creator with his TV partner Vic Reeves of the 'Morrissey the Consumer Monkey' puppet – when they once went to stay with the real Morrissey at his mansion, he talked to them endlessly about "a ghost he believed walked up and down the stairs of the manor house at night disturbing his sleep."[3] On 9 March 1980, Morrissey had already witnessed "a fleet" of classic flying saucers travelling above him "in a hexagonal formation", this event having "an astonishing effect on me" – in Alice's opinion, seeding him with advance info about Diana's death. After all, in a later interview, Mozza did admit to finding her death at the hands of the paparazzi "so predictable". But was this just hindsight talking, or precognitive alien brain-control? When Morrissey released a 1994 cover-version of "Moon River", was he even aware of the deep level of his mental programming by the lunarians?

In 1946, the US Army Signal Corp had instituted 'Project Diana', test-bouncing radio signals off the Moon. In return, the Moon-men had seemingly broadcast foreknowledge of their future Princess's death down to us Earthlings: it all showed up before Morrissey's UFO sighting, for instance in a 1968 issue of *Search Magazine* featuring articles about Jayne Mansfield, veganism and communication with "Space-People". In 1961, likewise, Jayne was photographed dressed as an astronaut for another article "in which she expressed her desire to go to the Moon". Jayne also once graced the cover of *The Illustrated Police Gazette*, together with an image of Hitler, headlined "IF HITLER CAME BACK TODAY!" But Hitler *did* come back to Earth in 1997, the year of Diana's death, in the Jodie Foster film *Contact*, where ETs from the star-system Vega (i.e., *Vegans*) intercept 1930s broadcast-wave footage of Hitler sent out into space by Nazi media and beam it back down to Earth with messages to let us know we have been heard – this whole film apparently being an allegory for how the Moon-men had received the US Army's radio-signals in 1946, then returned the favour by informing mankind about Diana and Dodi's future death. Hitler was also supposedly a vegetarian, so evidently the Moon-people were vegans, which perhaps explained their choice of Morrissey as the medium for their meat-maligning message. Alice quotes Hitler as saying: "There's one thing I can predict to eaters of meat – that the world of the future will be vegetarian!" – a prophecy evidently approved of by the Vegan Moon-men (see, Hitler was right about some things after all!) If you needed further proof, the satellite-dish array used to receive the Vegan Hitler-broadcast in *Contact* was the Atacama Large Millimetre Array – ALMA, for short.

There is more to the Moon-conspiracy than this – Satan's involved too, as is Anton Lavey, Dr Dolittle, Diana Dors, Leni Riefenstahl, Margaret Rutherford, Johnny Marr, Jainism and the obscure 1967 comedy film *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad* – but you'll just have to access Alice's full website to read about all that...

NOTES

[1] www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/38501/1/smiths-morrissey-princess-diana-conspiracy-theory

[2] Morrissey himself "unfortunately" denies this and prefers being called a "humasexual", i.e., he's into humans "but, of course, not many." www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/21/morrissey-humasexual-not-homosexual-autobiography

[3] www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/showbiz-news/terrifying-night-mozza-saw-a-ghost-982585; www.tapatalk.com/groups/needmoz/the-bleak-moor-lies-t729.html; Bob Mortimer, And Away … The Autobiography, Gallery Books, 2022, pp.216-17f74-tiktok-trend-explained/

All general unreferenced info taken from the millions of pages online at www.dianamystery.com, plus a short summary of Alice's findings in both text (www.morrissey-solo.com/articles/diana0200.htm) and video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTbFT8OMVIU) form.

For more on Princess Diana conspiracy theories, see **FT104:8, 111:06, 136:66, 137:66, 184:74, 222:16, 224:24, 236:26, 302:38-41.**

➾ **SD TUCKER** is an FT regular and fan of The Smiths, Morrissey, JG Ballard's novel *Crash* and bizarre conspiracy theories. His new book, *Hitler's and Stalin's Misuse of Science* (Frontline/Pen & Sword), is out now.

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A narrative of distrust

Conspiracy theories are nothing new in the United States, **Páiric Ó Corráin** finds in this finely researched and well-written study of the fear of secret societies

Under the Eye of Power

How Fear of Secret Societies Shapes American Democracy

Colin Dickey

Viking 2023
Hb, 368pp, £23.74, ISBN 9780593299456

In *Under the Eye of Power* Colin Dickey argues that QAnon is not an outlier, rather it is part of a long established Nativist narrative which runs through American history.

Harking back to the writings of Karl Popper, Dickey perceives conspiracy theories as “a secularised version of religion” and contends they must be resisted if a free and fair democratic system is to prevail.

Even the Founding Fathers do not escape the taint, says Dickey. Take George Washington: his transition “from an uneducated plantation owner to the head of a new nation cannot be entirely disentangled from his involvement in Masonry”. And yes, this book also examines the role of Freemasonry in everyday American life and politics.

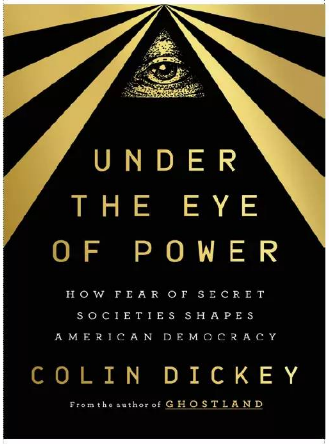
It’s more fruitful however to look at more arcane conspiracies through the last 300 years rather than the well-trodden paths of Freemasonry or QAnon.

During the 1692 Salem Witch Trials, Puritan preacher Cotton Mather literally feared an invasion from Hell, warning of: “A PLOT of the Devil against New England”. The War of Independence was seen by loyalists as a French plot to sap Britain’s military strength and put the Mother Country at risk.

Even George Washington in his farewell address at the end of his presidency warned of alien forces which would use “Many artifices… to weaken Democracy… often covertly and insidiously” – an admonition echoed by Dwight D Eisenhower almost 200 years later when he cautioned against the rise of the military–industrial complex.

The supposed plot by enslaved Americans to set all of New York City on fire in 1741 resulted in the lynching and judicial execution of hundreds of slaves and free people of colour. There was no secret society, no preparations for an uprising. At most a few people made idle boasts in taverns.

Attacks on Catholics in the 19th century were driven by a prejudice among Protestants that they were loyal only to a foreign pope and could not act as fully enlightened American citizens.


UNDER THE EYE OF POWER
HOW FEAR OF SECRET SOCIETIES SHAPES AMERICAN DEMOCRACY
COLIN DICKEY
From the author of GHOSTLAND

Near Boston in 1834 a convent was burned to the ground by people who assumed that the priests were using the confessional as a blackmail/mind control device to imprison and sexually enslave women against their will, that there were babies being produced that were then being murdered and buried in the catacombs beneath the ground.

George Washington warned of alien forces using ‘Many artifices to weaken Democracy covertly’

This is similar to the contemporary conspiracy theory around Pizzagate: the idea of the cabal of sexual abusers, which was being used against Catholics in the 1830s, with just a few of the key details changed but more or less the same narrative.

There is even a question as to whether the Molly Maguires, supposedly a secret society, ever existed as an organised force. Small groups of striking miners struck back against the mining companies’ bosses and their goons. The companies used vigilantes and the Pinkerton Detective Agency to murder union members and their families. Not just miners but members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (an echo of anti-Catholic bias) were also railroaded in show trials. A total of 20 men were hanged on the basis of flimsy or non-existent evidence. This led on to the Haymarket trial (covered in this book) which resulted in the hanging of four innocent men.

Mistrust of the Federal Reserve Bank fed into anti-Semitism, a trope encouraged by Henry Ford in the *Dearborn Independent*.

Ford saw Jews as alien invaders undermining US culture, banking and business. He even serialised the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in his newspaper. When he had an automobile accident it was portrayed as a Jewish plot to silence him.

The rise of the Invisible Empire (Ku Klux Klan) has a well-deserved chapter on its rebirth, rise and fall in the 1920s. It was essentially a Ponzi scheme using racism to make a few people into millionaires. Their targets were Catholics and Jews as well as people of colour.

The CIA originated subliminal advertising and organised clandestine truth drugs and mind control drugs tests on unwitting participants.

Sex workers on the CIA’s payroll would bring johns back to a CIA pad in Telegraph Hill, San Francisco. There they slipped their clients an LSD tab and the reactions would be filmed by CIA operatives through two-way mirrors.

The origins of MKUltra and its subsequent development are outlined in detail, especially its successes (few) and failures (many). But the drugs tests came from a *Manchurian Candidate*-style fear that the Russians and Chinese had perfected such methods.

Other fascinating conspiracy theories examined include Fluoride, but was it a Communist, Fascist or just a Liberal plot?

The John Birch Society looks a bit crazy with covert fears of “Negros” setting up a “Negro soviet nation”; they even thought that communists were ritually murdering members of their families.

The FBI’s COINTELPRO, running from 1956 to 1971, is revealed in all of its glory of murders, smears and burglaries.

This is a well written and finely researched book which is eminently accessible and mostly steers away from postmodern jargon.

My one criticism is that Colin Dickey has to some extent fallen victim to the cult of identity politics – but that might just be my conspiracy theory.

★★★★

Animals in illustration

Ray Heaton enjoys a stunning display of the natural history treasures of the British Library

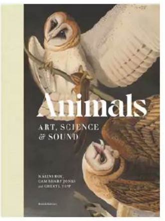
Animals

Art, Science & Sound

Malini Roy, Cam Sharp Jones & Cheryl Tipp

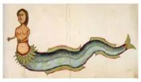
British Library Publishing 2023

Hb, 352pp, £35, ISBN 9780712354332



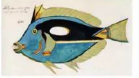
This book reveals the natural history treasures of the British Library in superb art and highly interesting and informative text. The book covers the exhibition of the same name held at the British Library in London last year.

There is so much impressively beautiful material in the book showing the sheer international and historical scale of these holdings in our national collection, in terms of manuscripts and printed books, artwork, photographs, films, sound recordings and even X-ray photographs.



Early illustrated manuscripts and particularly mediæval bestiaries feature, being a first attempt to document animal life on Earth since the concept of Noah's Ark. My favourite mediæval illustration is the elephant of Henry III, the first drawn from life in England.

Works by early writers on natural history include Aristotle, Pliny the Elder and Ulisse Aldrovandi. The earliest travelling naturalist illustrators include Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) showing tropical insects on food plants with eggs, pupæ and chrysalises, and reptiles.

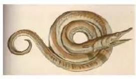


Early naturalist illustrators include such well-known names as Albrecht Dürer, Athanasius Kircher, Mark Catesby, John James Audubon, John Gould and Alfred Russel Wallace, as well as lesser-known 18th-19th-century artists including Elizabeth Denyer and Elizabeth Ann Kemp. Unique original illustrations include a modern album of tropical frogs (Alicia Bailey 2020), and there are individually produced one-off books on fishes.

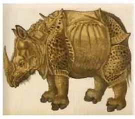
There is much early work from the Near and Far East, early Japanese whales (Kajitoriya Jiemon, 1794) being particularly striking, and there are superb early illustrations on marine and aquatic animals. Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* drawings including the famous flea, contrast with modern microsculpture: incredibly detailed colour digital photographs of insect specimens. The first animal movement photographic investigations by Eadweard Muybridge are shown.

QR codes in the book direct the reader to items from the National Sound Archive, which forms a part of the British Library, including the first recordings of bird songs by Ludwig Koch. Also featured are the first recordings of bat calls and the equipment used to understand ultrasound, which allowed bat populations and even cryptic species to be identified.

Whale sounds recorded on hydrophones and produced on an LP record identified whale song, and helped "Save the Whale" and marine conservation.



A number of extinct species are shown including the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker and the Carolina Parakeet; but the recorded song of the last male Hawaiian O'o bird is particularly poignant to me, as I once heard this bird calling for a mate, deep in the forest, before extinction silenced the species leaving just one remarkable recording.



★★★★★

No Pie, No Priest

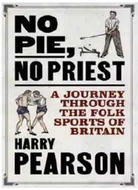
A Journey through the Folk Sports of Britain

Harry Pearson

Simon & Schuster 2023

Hb, 248pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781471198304

This charming book is a tour of what Harry Pearson calls the "small, secret worlds" of local and traditional sports, or at least vaguely athletic pursuits, that have stubbornly resisted eradication by puritanism, the dominance of corporate mainstream sports or the indifference and dwindling interest risked by any minority interest.



It is an alluring field introduction to this world rather than a comprehensive or scholarly study, but it rests largely on well-researched foundations. (A couple of throwaway suggestions of pagan associations seem drawn from older, now discredited scholarship, but they do not intrude.)

In part, the book is a narrative of being able to travel out and about again to events that have survived the difficulties of pandemic conditions. But, as his well-researched background accounts of these events demonstrate, they have weathered worse.

The pastimes he attends vary widely in character and organisation, on a sliding scale of recognisability as sports. Some have local leagues and formal fixture lists. Indeed, as he notes of quoits, "the sharp edge of competition and raucous local rivalries" play a big part in ensuring the continued success of sports outside the mainstream.

Some are more like field events over the course of a fair or festival.

Others have more the character of seasonal custom, with one-off annual events like cheese-rolling or the Hallaton Hare Pie Scramble and Bottle Kicking.

The book's title comes from a threat issued against a Hallaton vicar who refused to supply a pie for the event: "No pie, no priest and a job for the glazier". This is passionate stuff.

Which is why Pearson is such a good guide. He resists wackiness, without losing sight of the joyously idiosyncratic. This has long been one of his greatest strengths.

He is genuinely bemused and delighted at what he is reporting, and celebrates it by a sympathetic engagement with the people involved.

This is a worthy companion to his earlier book on north country fairs, *Racing Pigs and Giant Marrows.*

Pearson celebrates the obscure and undersung without sentimentality (he describes earlier pigeon-racing as "a hobby you could eat"), not by exoticising its eccentricity but by embracing it.

Identifying English folk football as a Mardi Gras tradition, for example, means that "two mobs of men fighting over possession of a ball in a freezing, muddy river in Derbyshire is the British equivalent of the Rio Carnival".

That understated good humour makes the book good company, and the amiability is studded with some sharp writing: Pearson notes a shinty player "snapping into challenges with the abandon of a man joy-riding in a stolen body". It took me a long time to clear up the tea I spilled reading the comment that "Fleetwood Bowling Club was mercifully free from fancy dress, unless you counted the blazer of the bloke sitting three rows along from me, which looked like he'd stolen it from a horse".

This is a book that will make you want to know more about these sports and about the people who play them. That is a recommendation.

Paul Cowdell

★★★★

A World Full of Gods

An Inquiry into Polytheism

John Michael Greer

Aeon 2023

Pb, 207pp, £22.50, ISBN 9781801520805

When I started reading this book, I realised that I'd never thought about why some religions worshipped one god, while others worshipped many.

Religious faith structures belief, as does tradition and custom.

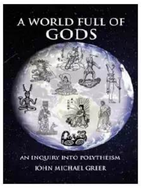
As an agnostic I adhered to the axiom that however you dress your spirituality up "it's all energy".

I was wrong to take a view that is reductive and ignores the richness of religious experience.

Greer's book made me recognise this and challenged my thinking about many aspects of belief. *A World Full of Gods* explores the nature of theism, with arguments for and against monotheistic and polytheistic approaches.

It looks at the nature of religious experience and how the gods one believes in affect personal and community ethics.

It considers the value of myths as more than stories from people long dead, and examines both time and the end-times through the myths of various religions.



Gods in polytheistic religions are closer to humans. They may not be immortal, and they're neither omnipotent nor omniscient. They may be restricted by the laws of the natural world in the same way as mortal beings.

Some, such as the Shinto living gods called *ikigami*, occupy a space between the human and the divine.

Polytheistic religions are less focused on salvation. The chapter on Time and Eschatology shows that many faiths don't view time as linear, with humans and the world sliding inexorably towards death and judgement.

Perceiving time as a wheel is common to religions as diverse as Hinduism, Paganism and ancient Norse belief and offers a different type of hope: that nothing is fixed and, whatever happens, the wheels will turn and the gods set all right.

Greer persuasively demonstrates how polytheism can resolve difficult theological questions. Why is there evil in the world? Why do bad things happen to good people?

Christians might answer by saying God tests their faith, that experiencing suffering is transformative, or that we have free will.

Where belief is in a pantheon of gods, it would be logical to assume that one god is malevolent and another benevolent; one sends ill fortune, while another is petitioned to remove it.

Don't expect an easy read. *A World Full of Gods* is more academic than many of Greer's previous books and engages with a wide variety of theological and philosophical standpoints. It is, however, well worth the effort required of the reader.

It's a pleasure to welcome this expanded second edition.

Paula Dempsey

★★★★

The Pirates' Code

Laws and Life Aboard Ship

Rebecca Simon

Reaktion Books 2023

Hb, 304pp, £15.99, ISBN 9781789147117

In recent years we've all become familiar with the idea that pirate ships were run as workers' cooperatives, their managements elected and their profits shared.

But did you know that those working in the pirate sector received disability benefits following on-the-job injuries, or that they had an official lights-out time of 8pm?

Rebecca Simon
THE PIRATES' CODE
Laws and Life Aboard Ship

During the "Golden Age" of piracy, in the 17th and 18th centuries, most pirate ships were governed by codes of conduct, arrived at by agreement of the crews.

They covered ethical as well as economic matters, along with discipline, and health and safety.

Rebecca Simon argues that the code, far from being a romantic peripheral, was in fact central to the success of a pirate company as an enterprise.

Some of the phrases used are reminiscent of the political discussions of the 1640s.

"Every Man has a Vote in the Affairs of the Moment" could have come straight from the Putney Debates.

Many clauses deal with obvious precautions, such as banning on-board gambling, drunkenness and fighting.

Others list the punishments for disloyalty or ill-discipline: marooning – leaving a man to his fate on a desert island – is a common penalty.

The ultimate sanction is also available: "If at any Time we meet with a prudent Woman, that Man that efforts to meddle with her, without her Consent shall suffer present Death."

Punitive measures in individual cases were often left to the collective decision of the crew.

Items in the various versions of the code ranged from musicians getting Sundays off, to "Good Quarter", i.e. mercy, being given when asked for.

Of course, the rules would have been little comfort to those nonetheless robbed, press-ganged, tortured, raped or murdered by pirates, democratically or otherwise.

Myths and tropes are ruthlessly throat-slit throughout the book. Pirates rarely stole treasure – they were after commodities to sell (textiles, spices) and necessities to use (ammunition, food) – and the burying of loot "never happened", hence no treasure maps.

There is "no reliable evidence" that anyone was ever made to walk the plank. Pirates drank punch, rather than grog, and it is "almost certain" that Blackbeard never killed anyone, at least until his final battle.

The Jolly Roger flag, however, really did exist.

Prof Simon's prose style is generally that of an academic rather than a storyteller, but the material itself is so strong, and the scholarship so impressive, that few readers will mind.

Mat Coward

★★★★

Death Lines

Walking London's Horror History

Lauren Jane Barnett

Strange Attractor Press 2023

Pb, 276pp, £21, ISBN 9781913689384

Death Lines is a collection of eight two-hour walks around London, each of them visiting locations from horror films.

As a tour guide, Barnett is interested in how horror films "respond to the history and character of the neighbourhood".

From the swinging Sixties to Seventies Gothic, Barnett shows how crucial the right setting was for the films she discusses. The threat of *Omen III: The Final Conflict* (1981), for instance, is heightened by its unassuming suburban location in Holland Park.

The book is intended to be a portable guidebook, so readers shouldn't expect an exhaustive study of every horror film location in London.

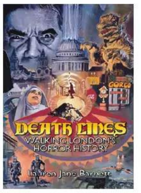
Nevertheless, there are some lesser-known cult films here that balance out the frequent appearances of bigger-budget fare like *28 Days Later*.

I, for one, was impressed to find myself outside 32 Wellington Square, the location for *I Don't Want To Be Born* (1975), in which Joan Collins is terrorised by a malevolent baby.

There are also concise overviews of cinematic themes (vampires, evil doctors) and insights into contemporary London that tell the reader something of the realities beyond the cinema screen: the bohemian associations of 1970s coffee shops, or the history of the Swedenborg Society.

It's good to see newer films interrogated for their nostalgic views of London, too – the "troubled nostalgia" of *Last Night in Soho* (2021), for example. Shorter segments at the end of each chapter provide additional discussions of films that aren't included on the walk routes, and these are often the most fascinating segments of the book, from 10 Rillington Place to the Enfield poltergeist.

Without labouring the point, Barnett skilfully draws links between the films and wider social and cultural history: Bram Stoker's Dracula sends a box of soil to Chicksand Street in the East End, a location chosen by Stoker for its contemporary associations with immigration and crime; *Quatermass and the Pit* located its action in Notting Hill, where the race riots of 1958 had inspired Nigel Kneale's original TV script.



The beautiful production by Strange Attractor Press has to be noted, with cover art by horror maestro Graham Humphreys and quirky line-drawn maps by Natalie Kay-Thatcher.

The maps sometimes allow space for the reader to add their own landmarks; I couldn't do an occult walk of Bloomsbury without adding in stopping points at the Treadwells and Atlantis bookshops.

An original idea, stylishly executed, and eminently readable.

Jennifer Wallis

★★★★

Weird wanderings

Andy Paciorek looks at two different but complementary fortean travel guides which will whet the wanderlust of wyrd voyagers

The Astral Geographic

The Watkins Guide to the Occult World

Andy Sharp

Watkins Publishing 2023
Pb, 294pp, £20, ISBN 9781786786739

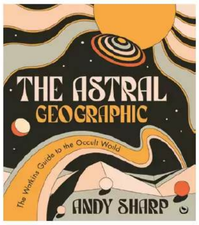
Weird Walk

Wanderings and Wonderings Through The British Ritual Year

Alex Hornsby, James Nicholls, Owen Tromans

Watkins Publishing 2023
Hb, 288pp, £19.99, ISBN 9781786786821

Watkins Publishing have added to the world of fortean travel guides with two titles to whet the wanderlust of wyrd voyagers. From the pen of Andy Sharp – musician, wordsmith and designator of the English Heretic black plaques (awarded to the strange denizens and dwellings that English Heritage overlooked) – comes *The Astral Geographic.*



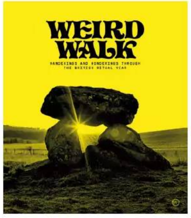
On my first encounter with reference books, I often flip through the index to get a taste of what's to come. Here we find an itinerary that takes us from "Anal Intercourse" to the "Zong Massacre". Better buckle up then, as it sounds like a wild ride is in store.

Many eclectic ports are found along the way – myriad souls encountered include JK Huysmans, Sun Ra, Felicien Rops, Madame Blavatsky, Moloch, Manson, the Son of Sam, Saint Mary and that dweller in many an abyss, the almost ubiquitous Aleister Crowley.

Although a chapter is devoted to Crowley and Neuberg's summoning of the demon Choronzon in the Algerian desert, for readers who may feel somewhat overwhelmed by the seemingly universal presence of Magick Uncle Fester in much of occulture literature, there are also many other interesting characters and scenarios encountered within the pages of this book. Other subjects include Atlantis, the alchemy of Fulcanelli, Hekate, folk curses, Viking witchcraft and much more besides.

Sharp's prose melds the informative and the poetic; although different in subject matter, in spirit it sometimes puts me in mind of the works of the naturalist JA Baker. Perhaps more accessible than his previous *The English Heretic Collection*, *The Astral Geographic* retains a targeted market as I suspect that mainstream TV producers may not send out Joanna Lumley or Bradley Walsh on a "Saharan sodomy and Satanism" safari. Both this book and *Weird Walk* could however prove good ground for offbeat travel shows.

Weird Walk perambulates in a hinterland between Julian Cope's *The Modern Antiquarian* and Sara Hannant's *Mummers, Maypoles & Milkmaids*, concentrating as it does on the British ritual year and megalithic monuments. It is more about rolling cheese than raising the dead. There is a little cross-over with *The Astral Geographic* in covering British standing stones' relationship with short horror fiction and some Haunted Generation television shows, but *Weird Walk* focuses more attention on a variety of British sites, both ancient and follies of a more recent era.



I particularly enjoyed its commentary on EF Benson and Blakeney Point. Best remembered for his 1920s socialite characters Mapp & Lucia, Benson's supernatural stories have not quite enjoyed the renaissance bestowed upon MR James, Machen or Blackwood, but are worth some attention.

In its accessible psychogeographical approach to combining history, folklore, pop culture and artistic and literary inspiration, *Weird Walk* would also be of interest to fans of Edward Parnell's *Ghostland*.

Weird Walk takes a seasonal approach and accompanies us from the Beltane fires of spring through summer's Burryman Parade, from autumn's Stag Dance of Abbot's Bromley to the winter Wassailing in the company of the strange bone-horse, the Mari Lwyd. Taking in many other ritual customs and enigmatic sites, it illustrates that for the folk traveller Britain offers a lot of visiting opportunities the world round.

Both books bear an Occult Revival-revival æsthetic, coupling Art Nouveauesque psychedelic title fonts, loose drawings, sun-bleached photography (*Weird Walk* particularly has some lovely, evocative shots) and a colour palette recalling the Gay Way primary school books, but both have as much substance as style.

As someone once said "Man cannot live on bread alone" … or prana, manna or foyson … so quirkily both books occasionally include stopping off spots where the weary wanderer may partake of sustenance … though perhaps of the liquid victual variety. While *The Astral Geographic* may point you in the direction of absinthe, *Weird Walk* pours you a pint of real ale.

They're quite different books in some ways, but are complementary and provide interesting nuggets of diverse information to both the active and armchair travellers.

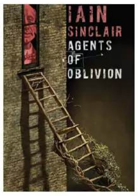
The Astral Geographic ★★★★
Weird Walk ★★★★

Agents of Oblivion

Iain Sinclair

Swan River Press 2023
Pb, 198pp, £13.99, ISBN 9781783807710

As well as writing his mainstream books, Iain Sinclair is a prolific producer of limited-edition small press publications, pamphlets and other elusive volumes. This is one such: Sinclair's homage to four fantasy and SF greats, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, JG Ballard and HP Lovecraft, illustrated by the marvellous Dave McKean, was originally produced in a run of 550 signed copies by Swan River Press.



While his mainstream offerings have become increasingly slight in recent years, *Agents of Oblivion* is classic Sinclair. Rather than attempt to pastiche the four writers, Sinclair looks at the world through their borrowed lenses, while remaining very much himself. He returns to his psychogeographical roots, and his brief punchy sentences bulge and twist with the compressed energy of his best work, the literary equivalent of the Incredible Hulk rupturing yet more of Bruce Banner's wardrobe.

Each story is anchored in a London location; his Blackwood meditation is set in Shooters Hill, where the author lived as a child, while his Ballard inhabits the grimy Westway of *Concrete Island*; and a trip to the Jubilee Line spoil heaps on the city's western fringes, now a landscaped park, is convincingly imbued with the lurking unease of Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness.*

Each story has its own ghosts too; Sinclair's now deceased book-dealing compatriots from Whitechapel are resurrected, and a revenant Graham Greene stalks second-hand book shops. Another ghost is Blackwood's fellow Shooters Hill writer, *FT*'s own much-missed Steve Moore, whose mystery-shrouded demise forms the heart of the book's opening piece. Stalwart *FT* clipping sorter Phil Baker gets a shout out later for his book on Crowley's London.

Sinclair has clearly had fun here; the stories are far from minor ephemera, but a hugely entertaining addition to his canon.

Ian Simmons

★★★★★

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Stone age scares

Andrew Cumming's "palæolithic horror film" offers epic locations and a specially created language

Out of Darkness

Dir Andrew Cumming, UK 2022
On general release

Originally titled 'The Origin', this film was shot in 2020 and first screened at the London Film Festival in 2022. It is only now getting out into cinemas. When a film takes this long to get a release it's usually because the studio didn't know what to do with it or simply because it's dreadful. I haven't been able to ascertain why it happened with *Out of Darkness* – maybe something to do with having been shot during the Covid lockdown – but I can assure you it's far from dreadful.

Set 45,000 years ago, it follows the journey undertaken by a small band of early humans to find shelter and fertile ground on which to settle. Adem, a fierce warrior, is the leader; Geirr is his anxious younger brother; Ave is Adem's baby mama, pregnant again as the film beings; Heron is Adem's young son; and Odal is the wise man, a forager. There is also a young girl, Breya, who is not of their tribe.

Not long into the journey they get the feeling they are being stalked by something unseen, maybe a beast or a demon. It circles their camp at night, without showing itself, moving fast and staying in the darkness. One night, Heron is snatched away. An enraged Adem wants to set out immediately to rescue his son, but the fearful Geirr persuades him to stay with the group and wait until daybreak. To get to the mountain quicker, and to stay on the trail of his son, Adem takes the risky decision to try a shortcut through a dark forest. Everyone thinks it's a bad idea, but they go along because they have no choice: without Adem they are dead anyway.

> *There is literally nothing to see except endless plains and forests*

This is when the viewer recognises the near futility of their situation. It's difficult to imagine what everyday conditions were like in that era, but the film does an excellent job of trying. The vastness of the landscape and the almost total lack of anything that might help the group survive is overwhelming. There is literally nothing to see, in any direction, except endless plains and forests. No passing strangers, no wildlife, nothing, not even in the far distance. The only thing nearby is the creature, and they can't even see that. This element of the film works extremely well: the photography is excellent, and the dark forest illuminated by a weak campfire is a striking image.

Despite being a British film, it is subtitled. This is because the group speak an early language created specially for the film by the screenwriter, based on elements of the Basque tongue. The non-English dialogue is absolutely necessary for the film to have any kind of chance at recreating a world impossibly remote in time from us today. Besides, this is early man we're talking about: nobody sits about pontificating, conversations are usually short and blunt.

The film is bloody, gruesome and graphic; but there is also a compelling story that consistently wrongfoots the viewer right to the point where you question who the monsters really are. Catch this at the cinema if you can, because the action scenes and epic locations are spectacular.

Daniel King

★★★★☆

V/H/S/94

Dir various, US 2021
Blu-ray, DVD and digital from 26 Feb

The fourth instalment in the V/H/S series is, like the rest, a found footage anthology horror film. I've banged on about this before, but everyone likes anthology horror films right? Staying up late on a Saturday night to watch *Asylum* or *From Beyond the Grave*? Great stuff. The format works because it doesn't matter if you don't like one story as there will be another one along in 20 minutes. It's rare that they're all duff. *V/H/S/94* is no different. There are four tales on offer, plus the obligatory framing story. Two, maybe two and half, hits and one miss is a good strike rate for this sort of thing, although it loses a point because found footage is so corny these days.

The framing story (by Jennifer Reeder) features an obnoxious SWAT team raiding what they think is a drug den, although it is of course something more sinister. The conceit is that throughout the complex are TV monitors playing VHS tapes of different events.

First up is 'Storm Drain', (Chloe Okuno), in which a pushy news reporter and slacker cameraman get more than they bargained for investigating an urban myth: standard stuff, but with gruesome effects and a nasty twist.

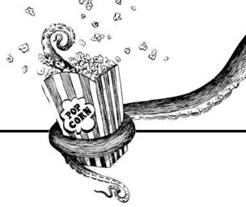
Then there's 'The Empty Wake' (Simon Barrett), my pick of the bunch, in which a young woman working at a funeral home is asked by her boss to act as functionary at an all-night wake. It's just her and the coffin, which contains the corpse of a man who died in horrific circumstances. There's a storm, the power goes out, and she begins to hear knocking noises... A classic tale, then, which could have been set in any era, and is particularly reminiscent of HP Lovecraft. It's well paced, well acted and, again, has excellent effects.

Third is 'The Subject' (Timo Tjahjanto), in which a mad scientist conducts grisly experiments on live subjects in an attempt to fuse man with machine. There's an almost gleeful sadism to this one – the bloodiest of the four – that feels at odds with the rest. A strong element in anthology horror films has always been humour, but 'The Subject' has none of that. It's full of pain, misery and despair.

Finally, the most amusing of the bunch is 'Terror' (Ryan Prows), in which a moronic bunch of white supremacists in Michigan believe they have created a super weapon with which they plan to blow up a government building in downtown Detroit. However, they lose control of their creation with deadly results. This one has the best twist of them all and a wholly satisfying resolution in which the hapless 'patriots' get their just desserts. This is a long way from Dr Terror's House of Horrors, but if you're a dedicated horror fan there's plenty to keep you interested.

Daniel King

★★★☆☆



TELEVISION

FT's very own couch potato, STU NEVILLE, casts an eye over the small screen's current fortean offerings

There's an odd paradox in certain paranormal TV programmes, namely the need to proclaim at the start that they're not fake; the effect, of course, tends to be the viewer questioning why they're quite so insistent about it. With the louder, brash, low-lit and suspiciously phenomena-laden shows it's more like a wink to the audience, but very occasionally, the piece that follows bears out such claims.

My Ghostly Footsteps (Apple/Prime) is one such example, in which (mainstream) documentary maker Guy Gilbert introduces us to the house where he used to spend his holidays, that of his grandparents; he tells how he was left alone there overnight while they took a poorly cat to the vet, and experienced what he believed to be a famous ghost that haunted the whole area. Now, 50 years on, he wants once and for all to work out what it was that terrified him so much.

He enlists the help of Colin and Karin from South Bristol Paranormal, long-established and reputable investigators, who show us all the tools of the trade and one of their vigils at Jamaica Inn where they use toys and nursery rhymes to try and contact two apparent child-ghosts named Tommy and Elizabeth. They're positive, open minded and eager to help. Gilbert also enlists the assistance of a man he calls "the most famous ghost hunter in the land", Richard Felix, who wastes no time in modestly pointing out that he's been in more haunted locations than anyone else on the planet, sharing his own paranormal history, which includes a green ghost, being afraid to go to the toilet alone and being locked overnight in a garage. When they attempt table tilting, Felix manfully manages to avoid going full-Partridge, but it's a close-run thing, as he reassures said table "I'm not here to embarrass you!" before promptly asking it if it's a woman over 21. I was briefly unsure where he was going with this until he then started eliminating other demographics, eventually settling on a child-spirit. "It's not battery operated!" he shrieks, pointing at the table, cackling away.

Felix manages to avoid going full-Partridge, but it's a close-run thing

Then they all go to Guy's grandparents' home, in which his dad, former neuroscientist Peter, still lives. Guy revisits his old room. Richard uncannily guesses that he hid under the bedclothes when frightened. This all sounds very woolly, but the last third has some valuable insights concerning assumptions about the "identity" of a haunting. Karin points out the potentially deceptive connection between local folklore and the establishment of ghost legends, while Peter the neuroscientist gently reminds us of the brain's ability to create patterns, and Richard attempts to get the ghost that frightened a now blindfolded Guy to come back. Ultimately, it's a curious man's attempt to answer a lifelong question, and (Felix aside) charmingly low-key.

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

When people criticise horror movies as gratuitous, sick and mindless, I remind them that some of the finest are largely bloodless: *The Changeling* and *The Innocents*, to name but two. But, if they brought up this month's picks, the only thing I'd argue about is the mindless bit.

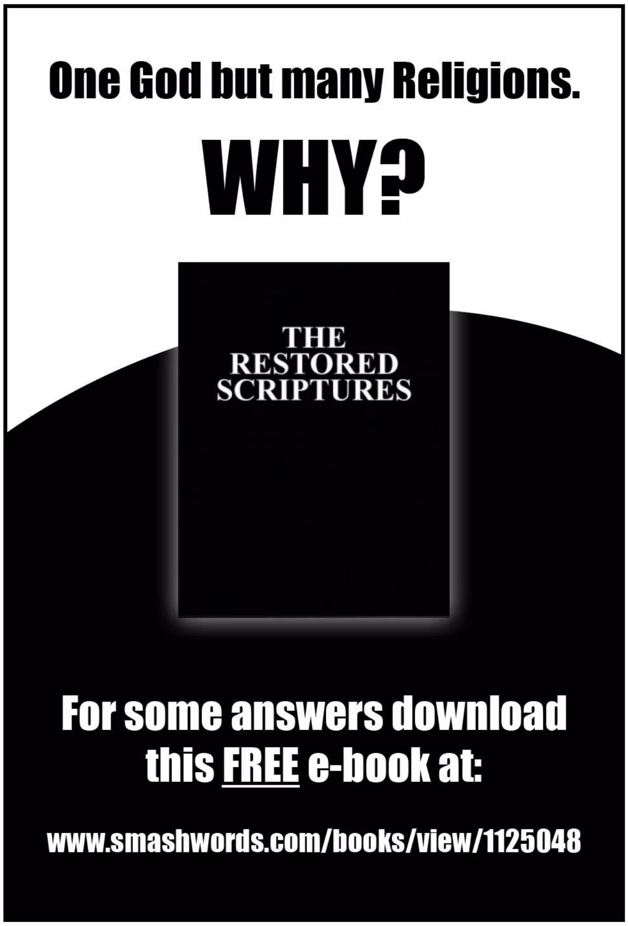
Take 1981's *Nightmare* (aka *Nightmares in a Damaged Brain*) from director Romano Scavolini – previously known for Italian hardcore porn. He displays transferable skills in this sleazy and uncomfortable slasher film about an insane sex killer naively released too early. Prosecuted for obscenity during the video nasties panic, *Nightmare* is depraved for sure… but great: tense, inventive and disturbing. The scene of the killer decapitating his father's dominatrix lover is grotesque, kitschy and cleverly depressing. Watching this in UHD is a treat – but perhaps run a shower afterwards.

The repulsion continues with a new Blu-ray of the French new-wave horror *Inside* from 2007. A pregnant widow meets a mysterious woman who wants the baby at all costs. It's one of the most visceral and wince-inducing films I've ever seen; yet there's a gruelling but poetic truth to this gripping story about the physical brutality of birth, the insatiable desire for children and the mental and physical wounds women endure to keep humanity going.

For our final entry, let's crank things up even higher – yes, it's possible! Making its UHD debut, 2008's *Bad Biology* sprang from the amusingly unhinged mind of Frank Henenlotter (*Basket Case*, *Brain Damage*, *Frankenhooker*). Okay. The plot… are you ready? Jennifer is a constantly horny sex killer who was born with seven clitorises and dreams of finding a man who can satisfy her. Could that be Batz, a troubled guy with a vast and sentient drug-addicted penis that detaches itself and stalks the community, raping women and sending them into a deathly paralysis of perpetual orgasm? With dying babies being tossed in the trash and Jennifer fantasising about having sex with God, this is as offensive as it gets – but like all of Henenlotter's stuff, it's a hoot. His films never come across as mere lunacy, though some will think that a movie with penis-shaped babies could only ever be so. I disagree.

Fun story. I watched *Bad Biology* the day before speaking at a Christian arts conference in Birmingham. I was pre-warned that the opening question would be: "What was the last piece of art that made you uncomfortable?" Driving there, I told myself, "Don't mention *Bad Biology*. This church crowd aren't ready for that." When the mic came my way, I couldn't help it: "I just watched a film about a man with a three-foot, drug-addicted penis that attacks women." Many eyebrows leapt, so I added: "The film itself didn't make me feel uncomfortable. I only felt discomfort at the thought of what other people might think if they saw me watching it." Critics of extreme cinema dismiss it as 'basically horrible'. The irony is that to miss the nuance of such movies is to be 'horribly basic' about why art and culture exist.

A three-foot, drug-addicted penis that attacks women



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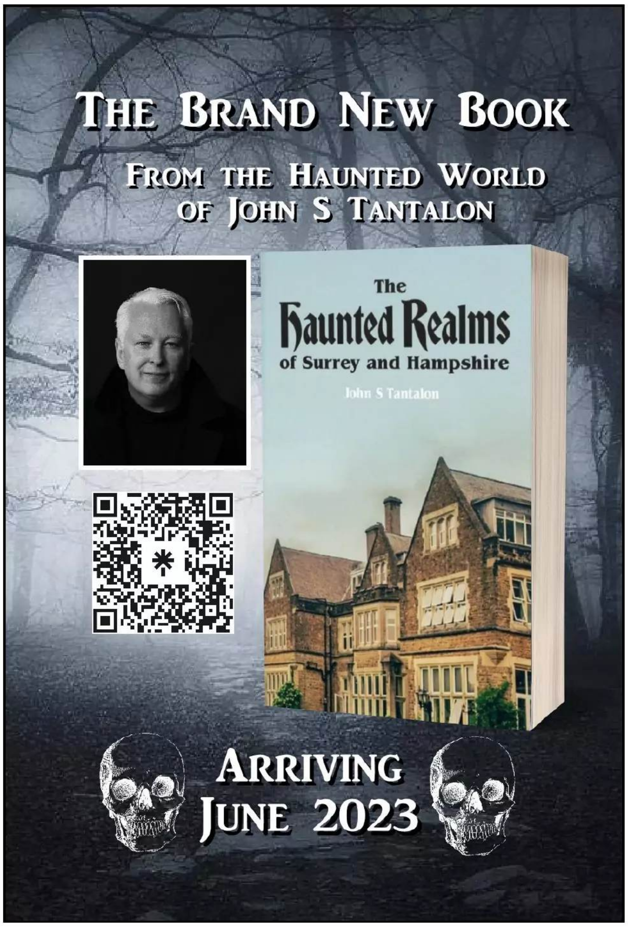

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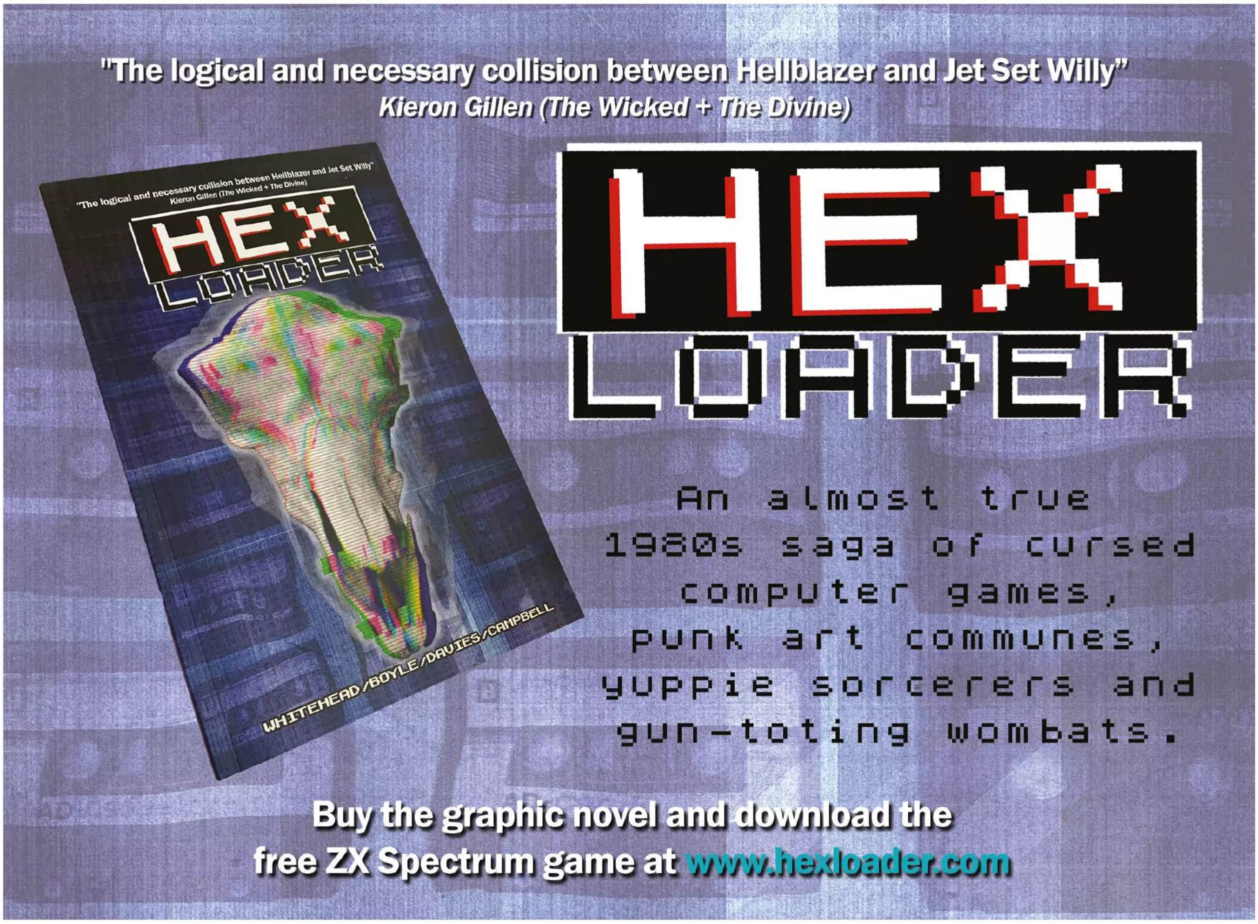

"The logical and necessary collision between Hellblazer and Jet Set Willy"
Kieron Gillen (The Wicked + The Divine)

"The logical and necessary collision between Hellblazer and Jet Set Willy"
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Satanic claptrap

I have to confess that my fortean principles slipped a bit when reading **FT439**. When I saw in Phantom Flings that one of the brides married her ghost groom at The Asylum Chapel (p.8), I couldn't stop myself from thinking that was somehow appropriate. Shame on me!

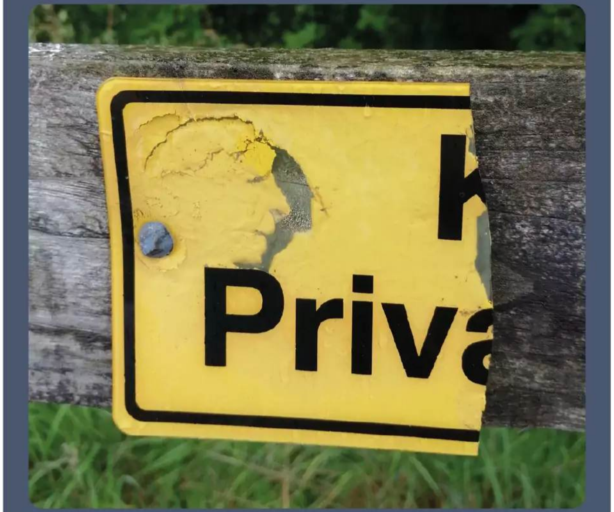
I found 'The New Demonology' by Bob Rickard (pp.46-50) to be an excellent treatment of the craziness surrounding the Satanic Ritual Abuse scare. I hate to think what the parents and children must have felt and experienced during this insane saga. I remember reading *Michelle Remembers* many years ago. I don't recall how I came to read it, but I remember thinking then that it was a heap of nonsense. I'm surprised I even remember it. Bob also mentions Dungeons & Dragons being identified as a Doorway to Danger. In my early 20s I played regularly with a group of fellow enthusiasts (I know you're thinking 'geeks'), and nobody who has ever played the game could possibly connect it to Satanism.

Further to the Forum piece on 'Amazing Facts About Strange Stories' (pp.52-53), I recall a children's annual my grandparents had. It was dated 1935, and had a science fiction story set in the future of 1948. In it, people flew about with the equivalent of jet packs. I seem to recall a wire cage, strapped to the flier's back, containing a propeller. Although I was quite young when I read it, I must have made a mental note of the dates because it was clearly a future that hadn't come to pass. The future that had come to pass a few years later was sadly quite different.

The review of *The Abduction of Betty and Barney Hill* (p.55) reminded me of a cheap 'The World's Most Amazing...' type of book I once read. I nearly threw it straight in the bin when I read the very first line of the very first article: "Betty and Barney Hill were a typical American couple". I think I'm the one who got taken for a ride there.

Dave Miles
By email

SIMULACRA CORNER



Ian McIlroy saw this face on a broken sign at the entrance of a deserted farm in Doagh, Co. Antrim, Northern Ireland.

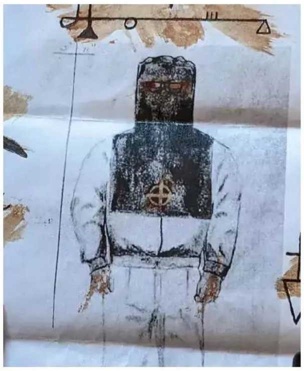
We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

Zodiac killer

The article "By Satan's Hand" [**FT438:10**] has a picture of a hooded figure depicted in Angel Almeida's drawing (right). The figure is clearly the Zodiac killer at the time of the 27 September 1969 attack and murder at Lake Berryessa in Napa Valley, California. I guess the Zodiac killer could be called Satanic, but he's not an obvious Satanic figure.

Gregory Sumrall
Mississippi

Editor's note: Thanks to Eric Hoffman, who made the same point.



Synchronous words

Two or three years ago there was a letter in *FT* from somebody noticing how sometimes he would be reading and hearing the same word at the same time. My security job allows me many reading hours per day while the radio is playing; mostly I read English books and the radio station would always be Studio Brussel, but just like in the rest of the world almost every song played is in English. I have also noticed that about once a week I would be reading the exact same word at the exact same time as that word is being sung/spoken on the radio.

Just like that original letter writer did back then I also wanted to write those words down and I chose 2023 to do that and so the whole year of 2023 I would write down these synchronous words in chronological order. A few times I would even hear the English/Dutch translation of the same word which feels even weirder and of course sometimes it would be one letter off – but I will provide that info in the list by using the forward slash and brackets.

Time – The Only – Never – Ghost – Human – Opponent – Destroy – Away – Control – Film – Cocaine – Edison – Home – Together – Young – Eyebrow/Wenkbrauw – White – Picture – Okay – God (Only) Knows – Gedachten – Looking – 3 – Family – Believe Me – Troubadour – Claimed/Geclaimed – Get(ting) Up – Walking – Mind – The Kids – Tongue – Forever – Shades – Bizarre – Celebrate(d) – Million – Coffee – Someone – 24 Hours/24 Uur – Collecting – Serious – Galaxy – Nasty – Suicide – Online

To be honest, I find some of these words (and combination of words) a bit ominous and hopefully they are not prescient, but I prefer to think it's just because of my choice of weird and fortean books increases the chance of reading/hearing ominous words like Destroy and God (Only) Knows instead of more innocuous words like Family or Tongue.

Frank Willems
Geleen, The Netherlands

Classical SHC

Are there any classical references to SHC? Turning to dry ash is certainly shocking.

Hugh Henry
By email

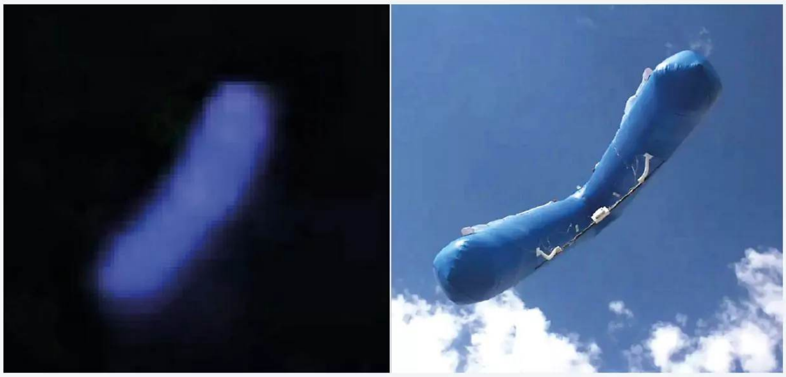
Barry Baldwin replies:
In mythology, Zeus blasts Titans with a thunderbolt, turning them into ashes. This is the basis of the Greek Orphism religious cult. Some ancient curse tablets ask the gods to turn an enemy into ash. For more, see Jessica Lamont, In Blood and Ashes: Curse Tablets and Binding Spells in Ancient Greece *– there's an online interview with her about all this. There are versions saying Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of ash after the initial salt in the Old Testament. 'From ashes to ashes'......*

LETTERS

Blue Banana UFO

In the annals of reported celestial occurrences, a conspicuous event unfolded on 29 December 2020, around 8.30pm local time over the Hawaiian island of Oahu. Eyewitnesses saw an unidentified aerial phenomenon, manifesting as an elongated, banana-shaped object emitting a luminescent blue hue. Multiple reports flooded emergency services as observers observed the enigmatic craft traversing the skies above Leeward Oahu. One witness likened its scale to something surpassing that of a standard telephone pole. The trajectory of this object spanned several miles before its descent culminated in a plunge into the waters off Ulehawa Beach in Waianae, Oahu. Subsequently, the Honolulu Police notified the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regarding the incident. Ian Gregor, the FAA spokesperson, remarked that despite an exhaustive inquiry, no aircraft discrepancies were detected on radar nor were there any reports of missing or overdue aircraft. A report by *Hawaii News Now,* which includes the UFO caught on video, can be viewed at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=JcZdpjZplhA.

Notably, this incident echoes prior occurrences of comparable nature. In 1989, the Royal Air Force station, a pivotal hub for military aerial traffic control in the UK, documented an incident involving a banana-shaped object observed above London. Intriguingly, a parallel can be drawn between this unidentified craft and the experimental Ascender 36 Airship designed by JP Aerospace of Rancho Cordova, California. These banana-shaped Ascenders, configured in a 'V' shape and clad in a blue exterior, possess the capacity to levitate within the upper echelons of the atmosphere, subsequently employing hybrid electrochemical rocket propulsion systems to attain orbital velocities at the fringe of space.



ABOVE: The blue banana over Hawaii (left) and an Ascender 36 Airship (right).

Historically, Fort expounded upon the concept of "phantom airships" materialising abruptly in the skies over England during the early 20th century. These craft were delineated as vast, sausage-shaped vessels equipped with extraordinarily strong searchlights. Fort postulated that these intelligently guided flying machines might have extraterrestrial origins, a notion echoed in recent years by sightings reminiscent of banana-shaped anomalies.

Of further intrigue is a reported incident on 10 February 1989, detailed by the *Daily Star*, wherein the famed pianist Liberace, purportedly manifesting at twice the usual stature of 12ft (3.7m), returned to Earth. His arrival was dramatised by his descent from a resplendent, golden banana-shaped spacecraft using a mobile stairway. Subsequently, witnesses recounted an otherworldly performance, wherein Liberace, with glowing fingers played a floating piano, regaling the onlookers with a medley of Hollywood show tunes [**FT55:33, 390:45, 408:32-39, 427:60**].

The recurrent appearance of banana-shaped objects in the firmament spans over a century. Fort's writings delineate sausage-shaped phantom airships during the 1920s and 1930s in England, parallel to the RAF's 1989 observation of a banana-shaped UFO above London. Allegedly in the same year, Liberace in a banana-shaped UFO made appearances in disparate locales, including Alabama (US), Cotija de la Paz (Mexico), Toulouse (France), and Voronezh (Russia). Recent accounts also report the sighting of a blue banana-shaped UFO over Polynesia in the Hawaiian archipelago, culminating in its submersion into the ocean.

The recurrent emergence of banana-shaped unidentified anomalous phenomena prompts the inquiry into potential underlying connections among these widespread sightings, spanning temporal and geographical boundaries.

Jeffrey Vallance
California

Routine weather event

Ulrich Magin's report – apparently based on German sources – that the Dutch beach of Scheveningen was closed after 700,000 square metres of sand had been lost due to bad weather – seems to have been garbled in translation. [**FT438:21**]

A quick look at the website of *Rijkswaterstaat* (State Water Management, part of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management), revealed there is "maintenance of the Scheveningen coast from September 2023" until the end of the year, with sand dredged from the sea by several dredgers and sprayed onto the beach to be landscaped in much the same way as has been done routinely for many years. Large-scale dredging operations to ensure that Scheveningen and other North Sea beaches remain and are protected from being (routinely) washed away by "wind, waves and floods" have been a boringly routine thing for many years.

FT's report of Scheveningen beach's closure was included in a round-up of European extreme weather events. But the forces that have caused Scheveningen beach to be closed are routinely mundane weather events rather than extreme weather. For Rijkswaterstaat and other Dutch sources, the 'news angle' of the story was that bits of the beach would be closed this winter for "maintenance" for a little longer than usual.

While the UK just has 'managed decline' in the face of North Sea coastal erosion, there's no such thing in the Netherlands. There is instead heavy use of engineering solutions involving its own considerable dredging industry.

Source: "Maintenance of the Scheveningen coast from September 2023" ; www.rijkswaterstaat.nl/nieuws/archief/2023/09/onderhoud-scheveningse-kust-vanaf-september-2023.

Matt Salusbury
London

Ghost hunting revenue

Re Dr Paul Lee's *State of The Spectral Nation* [**FT437:38-41**]: Are we seeing the impact of capitalism on the whole subject of ghostly goings-on? After all, if you consider pubs, hotels and other buildings that earn income from visitors, isn't it likely that a firm will 'sell' the idea of being

haunted to groups who are willing to pay… and advertise the venue itself? I mean, that's not free advertising, but being *paid to be advertised*!

And when it comes to the plethora of 'ghosthunting' groups – they are not researchers as they profess, but moneymaking enterprises themselves. They've just repeated the *Most Haunted* business model. In fact, setting oneself up as a YouTube 'investigation' group can be highly lucrative, considering the possibility of merchandising and monetisation. The initial outlay can be quickly made back.

Those venues who shy away from fortean fame are probably conflicted – are these 'enthusiasts' worth their involvement? After all, as Dr Lee quoted The Dering Arms: "Ten customers all sharing one coke and all using the toilets… not for us!" I've heard similar complaints expressed over a pub quiz!

● On *The Twitter Séance* by Kate Cherrell [**FT437:52-53**]: Are we seeing the re-branding of a ventriloquist show on the radio? After all, it's hard to 'sell' séances even with public performance and witnesses. It's just a shame that the messages that 'came over' were universally the same as in 'live' spiritual sessions: "I'm happy", "Be kind to each other", "I forgive everyone" etc. The only 'modern' inclusion is the Declaration of *Grange Hill* – "Don't do drugs, kids!"

Alan Cassady-Bishop
Filey, North Yorkshire

Fountains Abbey flashback

Sometime in the late 1980s my mother attended a World War One Society residential weekend conference at Fountains Abbey near Ripon, North Yorkshire. Fountains Abbey is a 12th century Cistercian monastery which lay dormant for many years following the dissolution of the monasteries, and is now a tourist attraction and conference centre.

The conference went very well with interesting guest speakers in the palatial grounds. Retiring to bed that night, my mother felt pleased with the outcome and looked forward to the next day's events. Awaking in the early hours of the morning, she looked out from her window to see a party in progress in the courtyard grounds. The guests seemed to have come to a fancy dress party with men dressed in WW1 military uniforms, some wounded with crutches and bandages, some in wheelchairs with nurses in attendance. Gobsmacked that she had not been invited to this event which seemed like something the society had organised, at breakfast next day she asked the organisers why she wasn't told about it. She was told there had been no party, either arranged or impromptu. Everyone was in bed.

Her research later revealed that the Abbey had indeed been used in WW1 as an emergency hospital and recuperation centre for wounded troops. Did my mum witness a flashback to the home front of the Great War? She is a very logical and practical person with little time for anything paranormal.

Martin Blackburn
Featherstone, West Yorkshire

Lexical Levities

Barry Baldwin's Classical Corner [**FT440:11**], where he wrote about humour in dictionaries, reminded me of the joke in *The Chambers Dictionary*. Their definition of the word "eclair" is: "a cake, long in shape but short in duration."

Martin Wyatt
Cumbria

The Condign Report

Thanks to David Clarke for giving us an excellent article recounting the vicissitudes of accessing the mysterious Condign Report [**FT437:16-17**]. But what was the bottom line? UFOs are just extremely weird weather conditions. Really? This sounds like something straight out of chapter one of the *Debunkers' Handbook*. Aren't we back in *Project Blue Book* 'marsh gas' territory? I would bet money that even Dr Clarke himself isn't entirely happy with that explanation. I suppose it is marginally more palatable to those who really, really don't like the idea of ET visitors, but hardly more plausible. Surely Ockham's Razor would have its work cut out choosing between the two.

Geoff Clifton
Solihull, West Midlands

David Clarke responds:
Being acquainted with Ockham's Razor, Geoff Clifton will be aware that the simplest explanation is often the most likely. For Geoff the simplest explanation is ET visitors. But I remain unconvinced.

Titan Again and Again

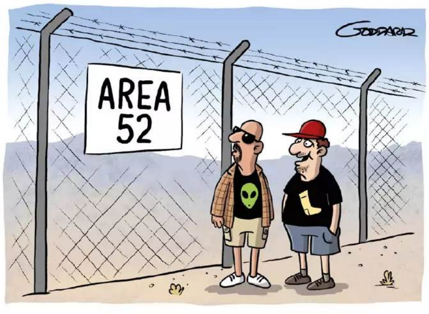
Phil Brand's reference to Morgan Robertson's 1898 novel *Futility: or the wreck of the Titan* [**FT436:59**], which has been taken by many as eerily predicting the sinking of the *Titanic* 14 years later, highlights something that has been absent from the coverage of the loss of the *Ocean Titan* submersible, her pilot and passengers [imploded 18 June 2023; see **FT434:15**].

While the tragic accident, almost inevitably, brought the computer chair experts online in their droves, with the usual combination of speculation, insider information (invariably read off somebody else's website), gossip, black humour and conspiracy theories, with no deference to the concept of "decent interval", there was, surprisingly, no mention of this disaster also having been predicted, with considerable accuracy, in the pages of popular literature; not once, but twice, and going back almost half a century.

The first time almost inevitably, was in Clive Cussler's best-selling piece of Cold War hokum, *Raise the Titanic!* While the eye-wateringly expensive film adaptation (about which producer Lord Lew Grade acerbically commented that "it would have been cheaper to lower the Atlantic!") bombed at the box office, it was not without its good points. The pre-CGI effects were generally very good, especially during the underwater search for the wreck, where the almost funereal progress of the flotilla of submersibles through the shadowy abyss was underscored by a haunting John Barry score. Most relevantly to the 2023 events, this part of the film graphically demonstrated the very real dangers facing even the most experienced submariners, operating state-of-the-art submersibles, at such depths. The scene where the submersible *Starfish* starts to flood, and then abruptly implode, packed a genuine punch, and now seems eerily prescient regarding the most likely scenario for the *Ocean Titan*'s loss.

While, like most of Cussler's oeuvre, *Raise the Titanic!* only exists on the fringes of science fiction, the other author in question was one of the reputed "grand masters" of the genre. Sir Arthur C Clarke had clearly been obsessed with the legend of the *Titanic* from an early age, with the ship's wreck making a cameo appearance in his first published story, *Rescue Party*, when the crew of an alien starship spies it lying on the dried-out bed of a far future Atlantic Ocean. It was only in the 1970s, however, that Clarke turned seriously to the subject of the *Titanic*, perhaps fuelled by his long-standing friendship with the film producer, William MacQuitty, who as a young boy in Belfast had seen the liner launched, and who is now best remembered for his Golden Globe-winning adaptation of Walter Lord's bestseller, *A Night to Remember*, which revived interest in the *Titanic* amongst the US public.

Continued on p.66



"It's where all the odd socks go."

CLIVE GODDARD

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Cool customers

In the long hot summer of 2007, I was holidaying in the little Italian resort of Viserba near Rimini on the Adriatic Sea with my teenage daughter and friends. Every evening, along with hundreds of others, we participated in the famous *'passegiata'*, or stroll, during which we would always stop for a delicious Italian *gelato*, or ice cream. This, because of the intense July heat, up in the high 30s, had to be eaten quickly before it melted.

One occasion particularly sticks in my mind because, having bought our ice creams and eating them rapidly, I noticed a good-looking young couple, one male and one female and almost identical, sitting on a public bench enjoying theirs in a slow and refined manner, unlike everyone else frantically licking up the drips running down their fingers. What made them especially apparent was not only their close physical similarity but the fact that their own ice-creams weren't melting *at all.* Given the ferocious heat, this was incomprehensible – and I have always wondered if they were aliens able to personally regulate the temperature of their delicious *gelati*? I suppose extraterrestrials take holidays too.

Maggie Ferrari
Petworth, West Sussex

Knickers mystery

I recently did some laundry, including a pair of my partner's knickers, which I draped over a radiator to dry. The next day I placed them in a drawer. A few days later when she was at my place, my partner asked why I had put a still-wet pair of knickers in the drawer. I was puzzled, as I'd been sure they were dry, but said I could have been mistaken – thinking them merely cold when actually still damp.

I then hung them up in the airing cupboard, but was perplexed to find them still wet a couple of days later. All other items in that batch of laundry were now dry.

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The knickers are uniformly damp, even the 100 per cent cotten gusset

With understandable bafflement, my partner took them back to her home. However, she also experienced the same issue, despite placing them on a hot portable electric heater; they remained damp even after two days or more.

I was at hers at the weekend; on the Sunday morning we ascertained them to be dry (finally!), although they did now have some water marks (presumably because they'd remained wet for several days). We went out for the day; my partner said she'd wash them that evening to remove these marks. Imagine our surprise when we returned home several hours later to find the mysterious knickers, still draped over the heater, but now wet again – as if we'd just removed them from the washing machine.

We both observed this – dry in the morning, wet again in the evening – so there's no possibility of one of us being mistaken. I now believe that when I originally put them in the drawer at my home, they *had* been dry, but had somehow become wet in the drawer over the next day or so (despite everything else in the drawer remaining dry).

It is as if this uncanny pair of knickers is drawing moisture to itself, like an extractor fan. They are composed of a number of materials (67 per cent modal; 20 per cent polyamide; 13 per cent elastane / spandex; gusset 100 per cent cotton) (See photo). My first thought was that perhaps one of these synthetic materials was attracting water. However, the knickers are uniformly damp, even the 100 per cent cotton gusset.

I promise the above is not a crude and rather silly hoax in the *Carry On* or Max Miller tradition, and while I fear my reputation as a scrupulous and serious paranormal researcher may now be in tatters, the spirit of fortean enquiry compels me to write. I realise that a case of soggy knickers doesn't have the same mystique as Rendlesham Forest, Skinwalker Ranch, or the Enfield Poltergeist, but it is nonetheless genuinely puzzling.

We would be interested if anyone has experienced anything similar, or can provide a convincing solution. No doubt (and as the legendary psychic investigator Eric Dingwall often said to his SPR colleagues): "Most extraordinary! I'm sure there is a rational explanation."

However, if this phenomenon continues, we may have to get the offending smalls exorcised.

Christopher Josiffe
London

Where's your coat?

My mum died in 2007, aged 85. A few years before she died, she started to feel the cold a lot. Even if it was a beautiful sunny day, she always wore large woollen cardigans. Because she felt the cold, she thought everyone else felt the cold as well. When I went into her house, the heat was the first thing that hit me. It was so hot. When I went out of the house, she would say to me, "Where's your coat? Put your coat on."

I'd say, "Mother, it's a glorious day outside. It's not cold." She would say, "Oh, I'm freezing."

Two weeks after her death, I was in a church in Hull and lit a candle. I go there quite often as it is peaceful and away from the noise and bustle of the city. It was a lovely, sunny day outside and I was wearing a dress with a short-sleeved summer jacket.

As I entered the church I could see that there was only one woman in. I went to make my way to the candle stand and the woman approached me with a reprimand, "Where's your coat?" she asked.

"Sorry," I said, not quite believing what the woman had said to me. She then looked in a daze. It was as if she had suddenly come to her senses.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, what am I saying? Why did I say that? I'm sorry." She rushed away with embarrassment, and kept apologising.

I still to this day can't explain it. Was it my mum letting me know everything was alright?

Mum used to laugh at adverts on the television and there was an advert with a frog on it to the tune of Day Dream Believer by the Monkees. I used to watch her face when she watched this. She laughed and laughed. I laughed at her laughing. After she died, it seems whenever I am down, Day Dream Believer plays on the radio.

Tricia Levack
Kirkcaldy

Sky paper

Around the turn of the millennium, I was fishing in mid-Sussex stillwater on a sultry summer day. As the heat increased and a threatening dark black cloud formed, I saw something 'hanging' below it, looking like a long roll of crepe paper. I had no way of judging its size, length, or height above the ground. I glanced back several times and each time the 'crepe paper' came closer, and lower, but disintegrated to nothing, though not visibly losing integrity – I mean I saw no holes in it at any time. At ground level there was only a slight breeze. I guess the entire incident lasted no more than a minute or two. I can offer no explanation – only the speculation that if it was ultra-light paper blown from a distant bonfire, how had such an apparently large item kept its integrity, with nothing else from the 'fire' surviving a similar distance?

Alan Gardiner
Burgess Hill, West Sussex

Moonlight howl

Around five years ago, my brother and I ventured out onto a field near to where we had grown up, near Kingston-upon-Hull, with our metal detectors on a moonlit night. The field in question was previously a Victorian rubbish tip, and growing up walking our dogs there we'd found odd little things – medicine bottles and the odd Georgian coin, etc.

On the night in question, around 12am, after a fruitless half hour or so of searching, we both heard, from a nearby hedge, a blood curdling, low, guttural growl. It seemed to mean "Leave now!"

We looked at each other with the unmistakable "You heard that too?!" look and hightailed it out of there.

Twenty-odd years before this, my father had been walking our dogs in the same area one night. He came back spooked, very out of character, and said that the dogs had frozen as something huge leapt out in front of them across the lane. He thinks it may have been a deer, but couldn't be sure.

Mark Hopper
Hull, East Yorkshire

Not Waving, But Drowning

The recent sad death of Shane MacGowan, lead singer of The Pogues, in the run-up to Christmas 2023, brought back an unusual memory. During the night of what a quick web-search now tells me must have been 18 December 2000, I awoke after having a very strange dream. I entered a branch of HMV or some other such music megastore, and saw a brand-new display-section of CDs, with the rather macabre heading not of 'ROCK', 'CLASSICAL', 'JAZZ' or 'POP' but of 'DEAD FEMALE SINGERS'. Most CDs were by the long-deceased Karen Carpenter, but another shelf was occupied solely by CDs of Kirsty MacColl, daughter of famous folk-singer Ewan MacColl, probably best known these days for her duet with Shane MacGowan on The Pogues' 1980s hit *Fairytale of New York*. This was odd because, as far as I knew, Kirsty MacColl was still alive. Yet, there she was, on the cover of her posthumous 'Greatest Hits' album, in a particularly weird pose: lying face down in some water, a bit like the baby on the famous old Nirvana album, and screaming in what looked like abject terror, with bubbles emerging from her mouth and her hair spread out all over the place in the water. I woke up and thought nothing of it, so went back to sleep. Come the next morning, however, I turned on the TV news to find that Kirsty MacColl was indeed now dead!

In an uncanny echo of the photo-cover of her album in my dream, she had been hit by a speedboat whilst diving in the sea off Mexico during a family holiday, apparently while trying to push one of her sons out of its deadly path. Looking this up online (which is how I know the precise date) I find this occurred near a place called the Chankanaab Reef, and that she died instantly, from severe head and chest injuries. On the surface of things, this really does seem as if, while I was sleeping, information somehow reached me about MacColl's death via what would appear to be psychic or paranormal means. If so, I have no idea why I was favoured with this oneiric information thus: I only know two or three of her songs, and the only recording of her I own is of her singing with MacGowan (whose death my dreams did not predict!) on an old Pogues album. I was certainly sorry to hear of her death, particularly in such tragic circumstances, but it is not as if I can lay any claim to being her greatest ever super-fan or anything. In the years since, I have done my very best to imagine the Spice Girls, BoyZone, Sam Smith, Stormzy and absolutely anyone at all who calls themselves a 'rap artist' all drowning together in mid-Atlantic but, as yet, still no joy.

SD Tucker
Widnes, Cheshire

WINNERS
NEVER
QUIT

QUITTERS
NEVER
WIN

Earworm

In the Summer of 2017 our daughter Ellie, aged 13, was away in Spain with our local Hexham rowing club. My wife and I took advantage of a child-free week to go hiking in the English Lake District and had decided to walk the Fairfield Horseshoe ridge route. I often go into autopilot on these longer walks, where I'm not really thinking about anything except putting one foot in front of the other. In this mentally free-wheeling state, music, lines from songs or all kinds of other stuff often arrives in my head and often gets stuck on repeat. And so it was on that day. Making our way up the steep rocky path to Hart Crag, the phrase "Winners Never Quit, Quitters Never Win" suddenly started going round and round in my head. I'd heard it before obviously, but it's something I'd imagine a pushy American coach would have on their wall; it's not something our family would say, and in fact I don't remember anyone in our family having ever used the phrase. "Keep Calm and Carry on" is more our style. We're English, for goodness sake.

The rhythm was quite useful in getting me up to the summit, but I remember being surprised and thinking where did that come from? It annoyingly stuck in my head for the rest of the walk. We got home a couple of days later and soon after, Ellie returned from her rowing trip with a present for us. She bought us a mug. You can imagine what it said (see the photos). Coincidence? Or did our minds connect for a minute over thousands of miles as she was thinking of us and choosing a gift?

Steve Watt *Hexham, Northumberland*

Grandma's visits

Over 30 years ago, my sister, who was about three and much younger than me, was flicking through some albums of family photos that she'd not seen before. When she turned the page she pointed to one and said excitedly, "It's the lady, it's the lady!" I asked which lady she meant. She replied that "she stands by my bed in the morning when I wake up".

The lady in question was our late grandmother who had died two years before my sister had been born, and as we didn't have any photos of her on display in the house, there could have been no way that she'd seen a picture of her before.

Many years later I visited my other grandmother, who was very much alive. My grandfather, her husband, had passed away a few months earlier, so members of the family used to visit her to keep her company.

On this occasion, Gran was a bit upset about something, so I asked her what was wrong. The previous day she'd walked past the living room door, cast a glance into the room, saw Granddad asleep in his armchair, and carried on walking up the stairs. When it hit her that he was actually dead, she dashed back to the living room, but he wasn't there anymore. It really upset her and she wanted him to come back. Whether she ever saw him again (she was with us for another five years after this) I don't know as she didn't mention any further instances.

DM (name on file)
Wortley, Leeds

Continued from p.63

MacQuitty had optioned the film rights of Clarke's 1960 science fiction disaster novel, *A Fall of Moondust*, and visited Clarke at his home in Sri Lanka. The two men clearly shared many interests, including archæology and Egyptology. Indeed, MacQuitty's high-tech alternative proposal for preserving the great temple at Abu Simbel, threatened by the rising waters of the man-made Lake Nasser, by building a multi-storied underwater museum around it, could almost have come from the pages of one of Clarke's stories.

It may, therefore, have been no coincidence that when Clarke returned to writing his novel *Imperial Earth* (abandoned for over a decade, from the late 1950s to the early 1970s because of a combination of illness, his commitment to working on Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and acting as a pundit on the Apollo Moon landings for CBS television), he combined both of the fascinations he shared with MacQuitty into its storyline.

Most central to the narrative was a viewing by the protagonist, Duncan Mackenzie, of pharaoh Tutankhamun's gold death mask. Mackenzie, the cloned heir presumptive to the Saturnian moon, Titan, is on an official visit to Earth, with two hidden agendas. Officially a guest at the 500th anniversary celebration of American independence, he has also been tasked with uncovering the secrets of a revolutionary new space drive, which may threaten his family's power base, while also depositing the genetic material required to produce his own heir. While looking at the funeral mask (famously photographed by MacQuitty for his best-selling 1972 book, *Tutankhamun: The Last Journey*) Mackenzie recognises the futility of his own family's striving to perpetuate their dynastic heritage in the face of both literal and metaphorical sterility.

ARTHUR C. CLARKE
GHOST FROM THE GRAND BANKS

The novel's most haunting episode, however, featured Clarke and MacQuitty's other shared obsession, as, in the opening of a chapter entitled *The Ghost from the Grand Banks,* Clarke describes a refloated, rusty, but once more seaworthy, *Titanic*, coming into dock at New York's Pier 59, completing her maiden voyage a mere 360 years late. In a reception held in the liner's renovated ballroom, Mackenzie is reunited with his first love, the Machiavellian Catherine Linden (Calindy) Ellerman, whose global events management company had overseen the salvage of the ship, in a scene that would, a couple of years later, be echoed by a similar tryst involving *Raise the Titanic!*'s hero, Dirk Pitt, and his mistress.

When *Imperial Earth* finally reached print in 1975, proposals for rising the sunken liner had been circulating (not least between lawyers' offices), with suggestions stretching from the surreal (pumping the hull full of ping-pong balls, which must have appealed to the table-tennis fanatic Clarke) to the science fictional (attaching buoyancy tanks filled with the highly volatile rocket fuel hydrazine, along the length of either side of the hull). All such proposals, as did Ms Ellerman's marketing coup in the novel, relied on the premise that the eye-witnesses to *Titanic*'s sinking had been mistaken, and the ship had not broken its back just before going under. The popular belief, obviously shared by Clarke, was that the hull had soft-landed on a thick layer of abyssal ooze, and so was essentially intact, protected from corrosion by the extreme cold and dark found at the depths at which she lay.

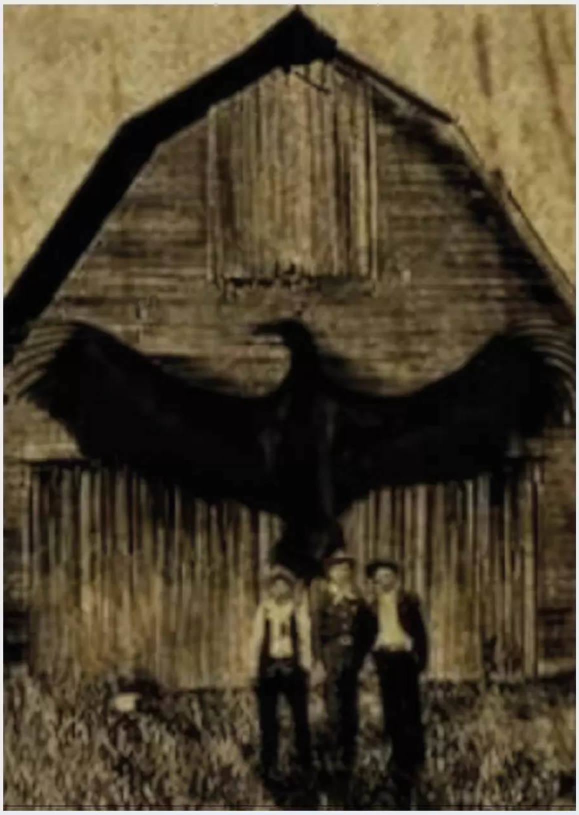
Even when confronted by the shattered remains of the pride of Edwardian engineering, as revealed by Dr Robert Ballard's 1985 expedition, Clarke seems to have refused to acknowledge that this was the end of the dream. It was this refusal to accept what seemed to be a manifest, unavoidable reality, that seems to lie at the heart of much of the quite harsh criticism, mostly online, of his last literary expedition to the depths off Newfoundland.

In fact, *The Ghost from the Grand Banks* (1990) might now be regarded as very prescient in its story of a gold rush style race by rival corporate players to salvage the remains of the sunken liner in what is little more than a ghoulish combination of exercise in exploitation and marketing campaign. Clarke, too, had one of his competitors succumb to a fatal submarine disaster, not involving a crack naval crew, as in Cussler's novel, but, as was the case with the *Ocean Titan*, a charismatic maverick engineer, piloting a submersible of his own design.

In perhaps a final irony, the massive multinational search for the *Ocean Titan* seemed, at least in public, to be motivated by the unwitting desire to replicate the daring deep sea rescue that formed the climax of an early Clarke foray beneath the waves, from his 1950s heyday as a historian of the near future, *The Deep Range*. Instead, as it turned out, it was the much-derided *Ghost from the Grand Banks* that proved far closer to the mark, with its acknowledgement that hubris was not the prerogative of the post-Victorian era, but indeed is still very much with us.

Hadrian Jeffs
Long Stratton, Norfolk

Another Thunderbird photo



The Thunderbird photo I remember was not the one found by Andy Kelly [**FT429:22**] – my memory is of the one reproduced here. Of course it's possible that everyone who remembers the photo, in whatever publication or format, is experiencing a glitch in a Matrix world controlled by pterodactyls, which turn out not be extinct after all. Also possible (and perhaps more likely, if less interesting) is that we have false memories of where we saw certain images in the first place.

Lu Hersey, *Glastonbury, Somerset*

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FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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139. Tokyo's sacred spaces

LEWIS HURST takes us on a tour of a secular city's hidden religious byways

PHOTOS: LEWIS HURST

ABOVE LEFT: The sacred gingko tree at Zoshigaya Kishimojindo. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Fox statue (with balls of foxfire) at Oji Inari Jinja.

Tokyo is not famous for tradition or antiquity. Flattened first by the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and again by World War II firebombs, it is the sleek bottomless bottle into which young Japanese provincials have poured themselves for a century and a half. In this thoroughly modern metropolis they can find new lives, jobs, convenience and endless entertainment. Meanwhile domestic and international tourists swarm around its elegant cousin Kyoto, queuing for traditional culture, and the Japanese countryside ages and empties. Those who visit Tokyo from overseas are generally looking for the futuristic neon city of robot restaurants and the Shibuya Scramble Crossing. But behind the skyscrapers and between the karaoke bars and pachinko parlours we can still find the homes of Japan's old gods.

The Japanese are known for their lack of religious belief. A survey conducted by the national broadcaster NHK in 2008 found that 49% of those interviewed did "not follow any religion".[1] More recently, I read a short interview with a young Japanese student which included the striking statement: "As I'm Japanese, religion doesn't matter in my daily life."[2] You wouldn't expect to hear irreligiosity tied to national identity in most countries, barring those under communist regimes. Those ethnic Japanese who do identify as religious are either part of the country's tiny but devout Christian minority or adherents of Buddhism, which reached Japan in the 6th century.

The main symbol of the temple is the horned owl

There is, however, another religion central to Japanese culture. Shinto is the country's native animist religion, based on the worship of *kami* (gods or spirits). *Kami* can be anything from the Sun goddess Amaterasu, from whom the Imperial Family were traditionally believed to descend, to natural forces in the environment, to the local deities who live in rocks, trees, mountains and rivers. Buddhism and Shinto have managed to coexist in Japan for more than 1,000 years. Rather than destroying the old religion, the early Buddhist priests recognised the *kami* as beings that were themselves on the way to enlightenment and incorporated them into their worship. Between the 1860s and the 1930s, as Japan hurtled towards totalitarianism, nationalists strove to separate the two in order to reinforce "State Shinto", a cult dedicated to the worship of the Emperor. After wartime defeat and a new peacetime constitution guaranteeing freedom of religion, Buddhism and Shinto once again began to grow side-by-side. This is why so many of the Buddhist sites of worship in Japan have smaller areas devoted to Shinto in their grounds, or spaces devoted to slightly altered versions of Shinto gods. It is also the reason why so many Japanese have difficulty explaining the difference between a temple (mainly Buddhist) and a shrine (mainly Shinto).

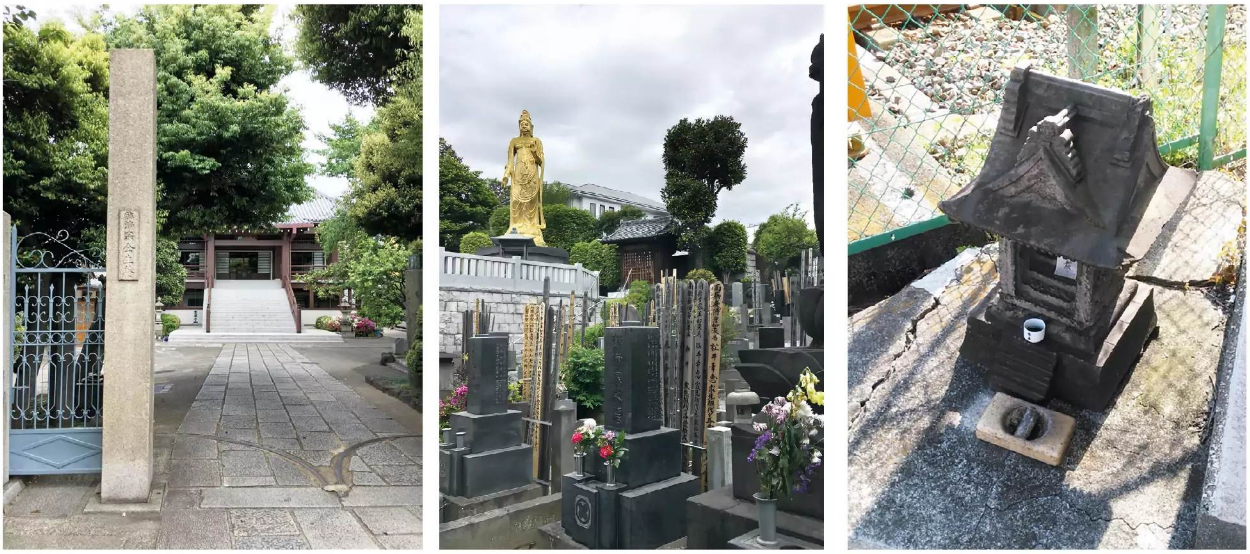
Though most Japanese do not profess to be religious, every year thousands visit these shrines and temples (especially at New Year) to make offerings, buy lucky charms and divine their future. In Japan, it is ritual that matters, not creed, and the Japanese are said to be "Shinto when they live, Buddhist when they die". This is one of the reasons that the *kami* have remained part of ordinary life in Japan.

Tourists looking for sacred spaces in Tokyo will head to one of the big two, Meiji Jingu (Shinto) or Sensoji (Buddhist). If you want to get to know and pay your respects to Japan's deities, then here's my personal selection of shrines and temples.

ZOSHIGAYA KISHIMOJINDO

Sitting in the shadow of Sunshine 60, once the tallest skyscraper in Asia, and a few steps from Tokyo's last remaining tramline, Zoshigaya Kishimojindo dates back to 1578 and is one of the most charmingly situated Buddhist temples in the city. A short walk from the tram stop takes the visitor through an avenue of large Japanese zelkova trees dating back to the Edo period, while the temple grounds contain a kiosk which locals told me dates back to 1796.

The temple itself is dedicated to Kishimojin, a goddess who ensures easy childbirth and helps with the care of children. The main symbol of the temple is the horned owl, and visitors can buy delightful figures of owls woven from rice-straw to take home. In October the grounds fill with tents selling food and drink as locals mark the death of Nichiren, founder of the Nichiren sect within Buddhism, with a parade and festival. However, the most



PHOTOS: LEWIS HURST

ABOVE LEFT: Zenshoan. **ABOVE CENTRE:** The golden Buddha watches over the graves at Zenshoan. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A miniature shrine at a Tokyo level crossing.

notable feature of Zoshigaya Kishimojindo is the massive ginkgo tree that stands near the entrance. With a trunk circumference of 6.63m (22ft) and a height of 32.5m (107ft), this tree is undoubtedly one of the oldest living things in Tokyo and is the second-biggest gingko in Japan. In Shinto fashion this tree is marked as sacred with a *shimenawa*, a rice-straw rope with paper lightning-bolts attached. People still come to pray to the tree, especially in connection with children. On my last visit I saw a mother park her buggy and get her phone out so she could take a picture of her baby with this benign giant.

OJI INARI JINJA

Inari holds a special place in Shinto because of the god's connection with rice, Japan's staple food. In the Edo period, Inari also became associated with success in business and now there are more than 30,000 Inari shrines throughout the country.[3] These are immediately recognisable due to their red *torii* gates, which signify the boundary between mundane and sacred space, and fox statues, foxes being the *shinshi* or messengers of Inari (**FT214:30-37, 418:20**).

Oji Inari Jinja was immortalised by woodblock print artist Hiroshige in 1857 in a picture depicting foxes on their way to the shrine at New Year. This picture is used on the *ema*, or votive tablets, on which visitors can write their prayers. It is also the inspiration for an annual fox parade in which locals dressed in kimonos and fox masks walk through the streets to the shrine to see in the New Year. The shrine is attached to a kindergarten, as many others are. It has one main shrine and several subsidiary ones, including a small cave shrine at which, on my last visit, an offering of tofu had been made: In Japan, tofu is traditionally believed to be a fox's favourite food.

ZENSHOAN

Its unassuming exterior and the presence of a graveyard at first suggest that Zenshoan is not open to the casual visitor, but rather a place in which families with a connection to the temple can pray for the souls of their ancestors. The temple's most notable feature is the large golden Buddha overlooking the cemetery. However, every August this temple hosts an exhibition of *yurei-ga*, traditional paintings of Japanese ghosts on scrolls. These paintings were part of the collection of Sanyutei Encho (1839-1900), a *rakugoka* or traditional storyteller who lived through Japan's breakneck transition from isolated feudalism to industrial modernity. Most *rakugoka* tell comical tales punctuated by wordplay. However, in the summer many switch to ghost stories, hoping to cool their audience down with a pleasing shiver. For a small donation visitors can enjoy a rotating display of these eerie, chilling and beautiful depictions of traditional spectres in the suitable surroundings of a temple used mainly for funerals and memorial services.

WAYSIDE GODS

A few years ago I was walking in the shadow of Tokyo Skytree, Japan's tallest structure at 634 metres (2,080ft). The neighbourhood I passed through could not have contrasted more with the slick futuristic landmark to which so many tourists flock. I walked past post-war wooden houses and old shops with few customers until I came to a level crossing, a common thing in Tokyo. Next to the crossing was a tiny stone shrine, a perfect replica of a full-sized version. On the miniature altar someone had taped a piece of paper, most likely a talisman representing the power of the divine. Standing before the talisman was a tiny sake cup of the kind usually seen in old-fashioned bars, and in front of the shrine someone had placed a lump of incense, for purification. The shrine was probably placed there to prevent accidents or even to soothe the souls of those killed in previous collisions. As scholar of Japanese ghost stories Zack Davisson writes, the placation of unhappy spirits is "quintessential to Japanese culture", with its "compact between the living and the dead".[4]

Another roadside divinity that holds a special place for me is Shoumen Kongou. In Tanashi, an otherwise nondescript suburb in the west of Tokyo, is the magnificent Koushin-yu, a traditional public bath or *sento*. This bathhouse, built to look like a temple, takes its name from the Koushin cult, a uniquely Japanese form of worship that combines Taoism and tantric beliefs originating in Hinduism. Beginning in the early mediæval period, the cult spread throughout Japan, offering participants rituals that would ward off illness. The public bath, at which I was a regular for two years, is neighbour to a shrine to Shoumen Kongou, a six-armed tantric deity associated with Koushin because of his "powers against various illnesses and demons, against attacks by strange creatures, eye diseases, breathing disorders, and many other ailments".[5] A sacred *shimenawa* rope, used to signal purity and the presence of the divine, hangs over a stone pillar with its carving of Shoumen Kongou standing over the famous "three wise monkeys" who "see no evil, speak no evil and hear no evil".

NOTES

1 NHK Monthly Report on Broadcast Research, May 2009, "'Something Spiritual' Attracting the Japanese." www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/english/reports/summary/200905/05.html

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3 Kenji Kato, *Shinto Shrine*, Shogakukan 2017, p. 71.

4 Zack Davisson, *Yurei: The Japanese Ghost*, Chin Music Press, 2015, pp. 62-63.

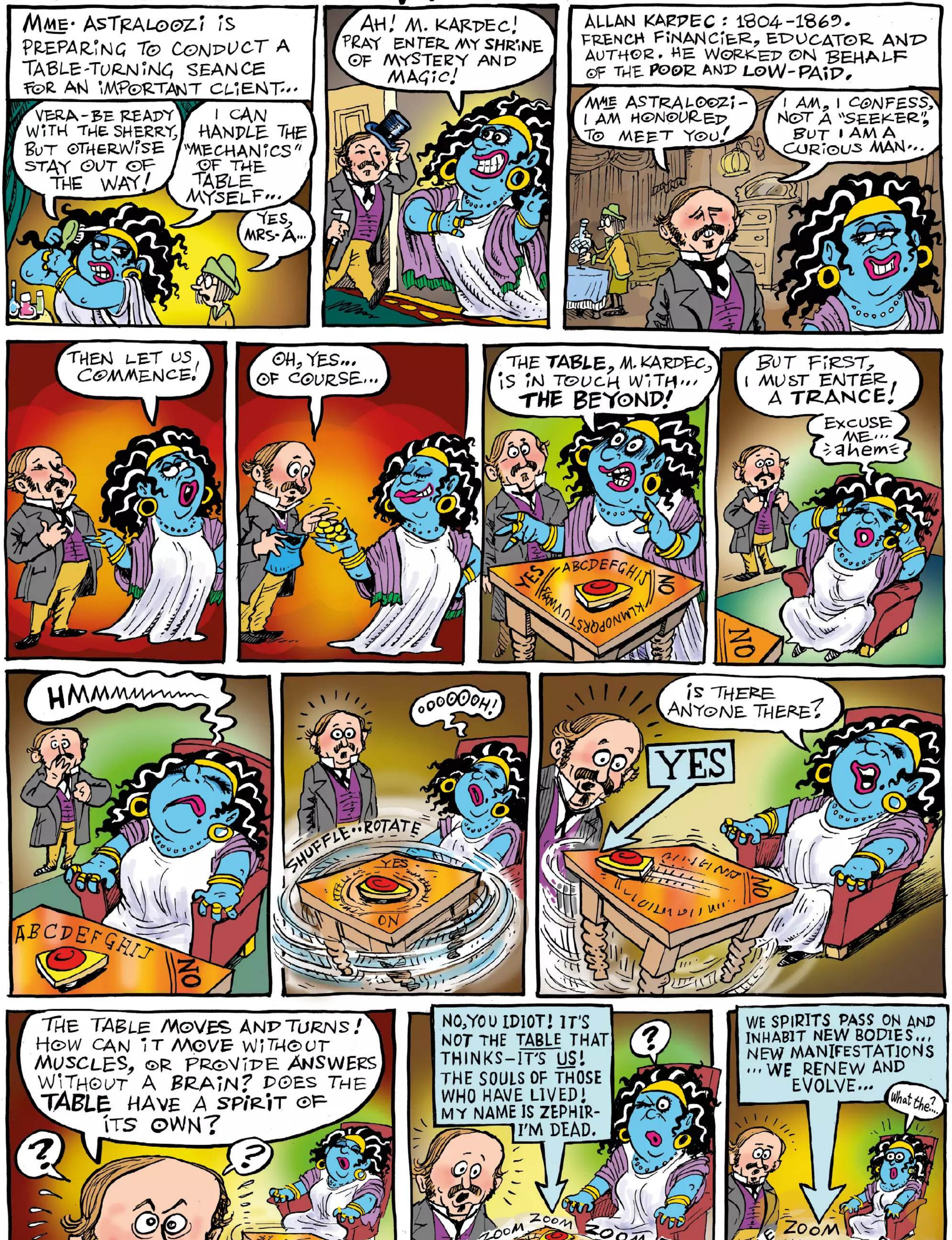
5 Mark Schumacher, Mark, "Monkey in Japan: Page Three – Japan Monkey Lore", www.onmarkproductions.com/html/monkey-koushin-p3.html

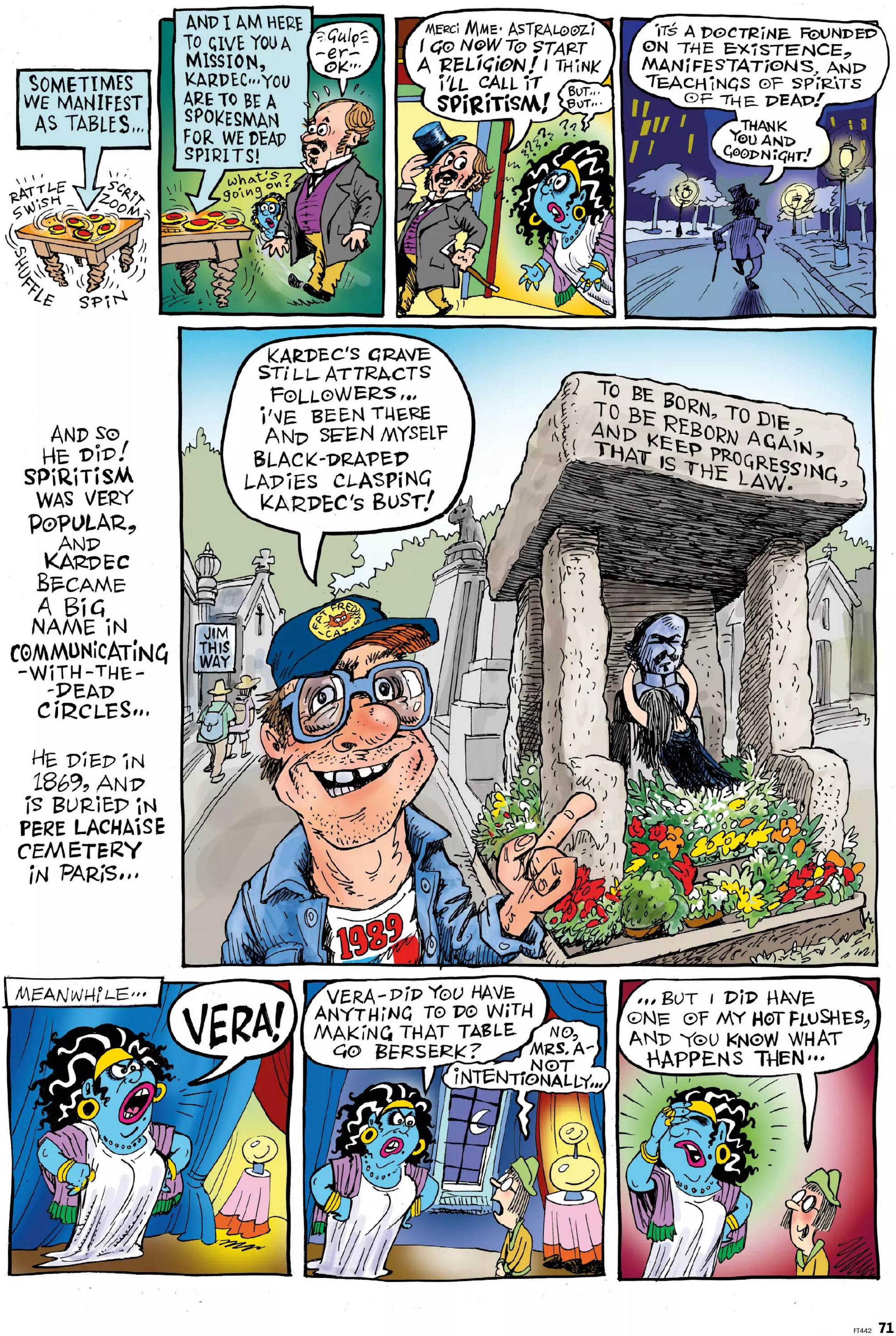
LEWIS HURST studied ethnology in Edinburgh, taught English in Tokyo for seven years and is now a bookseller in London. He loves nature, folklore, pubs and George Orwell, in that order.

PHENOMENOMIX

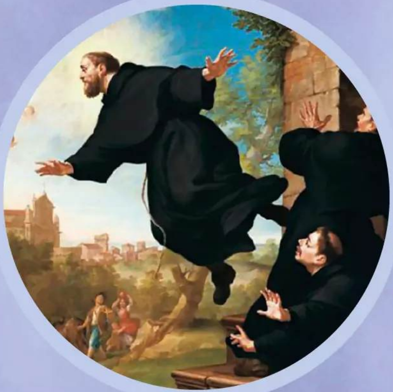
ALLAN KARDEC

HUNT EMERSON


MME· ASTRALOOZI IS PREPARING TO CONDUCT A TABLE-TURNING SEANCE FOR AN IMPORTANT CLIENT...
VERA - BE READY WITH THE SHERRY, BUT OTHERWISE STAY OUT OF THE WAY!
I CAN HANDLE THE "MECHANICS" OF THE TABLE MYSELF...
YES, MRS· A...
AH! M. KARDEC! PRAY ENTER MY SHRINE OF MYSTERY AND MAGIC!
ALLAN KARDEC : 1804-1869. FRENCH FINANCIER, EDUCATOR AND AUTHOR. HE WORKED ON BEHALF OF THE POOR AND LOW-PAID.
MME ASTRALOOZI - I AM HONOURED TO MEET YOU!
I AM, I CONFESS, NOT A "SEEKER", BUT I AM A CURIOUS MAN...
THEN LET US COMMENCE!
OH, YES... OF COURSE...
THE TABLE, M. KARDEC, IS IN TOUCH WITH... THE BEYOND!
YES
ABCDEFGHIJ
NO
KLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
BUT FIRST, I MUST ENTER A TRANCE!
EXCUSE ME... ahem
NO
HMMmmmmm
ABCDEFGHIJ
NO
oooOOOH!
SHUFFLE··ROTATE
YES
ON
IS THERE ANYONE THERE?
YES
NO
THE TABLE MOVES AND TURNS! HOW CAN IT MOVE WITHOUT MUSCLES, OR PROVIDE ANSWERS WITHOUT A BRAIN? DOES THE TABLE HAVE A SPIRIT OF ITS OWN?
?
?
NO, YOU IDIOT! IT'S NOT THE TABLE THAT THINKS - IT'S US! THE SOULS OF THOSE WHO HAVE LIVED! MY NAME IS ZEPHIR - I'M DEAD.
?
ZOOM ZOOM ZOOM ZOOM ZOOM ZOOM ZOOM
WE SPIRITS PASS ON AND INHABIT NEW BODIES... NEW MANIFESTATIONS ... WE RENEW AND EVOLVE...
What the...?
RATTLE ZOOM RATTLE
RATTLE


SOMETIMES WE MANIFEST AS TABLES...
RATTLE
SWISH
SCRIT
ZOOM
SHUFFLE
SPIN
AND I AM HERE TO GIVE YOU A MISSION, KARDEC... YOU ARE TO BE A SPOKESMAN FOR WE DEAD SPIRITS!
Gulp -er- OK...
what's going on?
MERCI MME. ASTRALOOZI I GO NOW TO START A RELIGION! I THINK I'LL CALL IT SPIRITISM!
BUT... BUT...
??? ??
IT'S A DOCTRINE FOUNDED ON THE EXISTENCE, MANIFESTATIONS, AND TEACHINGS OF SPIRITS OF THE DEAD!
THANK YOU AND GOODNIGHT!
AND SO, HE DID! SPIRITISM WAS VERY POPULAR, AND KARDEC BECAME A BIG NAME IN COMMUNICATING-WITH-THE-DEAD CIRCLES...
HE DIED IN 1869, AND IS BURIED IN PERE LACHAISE CEMETERY IN PARIS...
KARDEC'S GRAVE STILL ATTRACTS FOLLOWERS... I'VE BEEN THERE AND SEEN MYSELF BLACK-DRAPED LADIES CLASPING KARDEC'S BUST!
TO BE BORN, TO DIE, TO BE REBORN AGAIN, AND KEEP PROGRESSING, THAT IS THE LAW.
JIM THIS WAY
FAT FREDDY'S CAT
1989
MEANWHILE...
VERA!
VERA- DID YOU HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH MAKING THAT TABLE GO BERSERK?
NO, MRS. A- NOT INTENTIONALLY...
...BUT I DID HAVE ONE OF MY HOT FLUSHES, AND YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENS THEN...

COMING
NEXT MONTH



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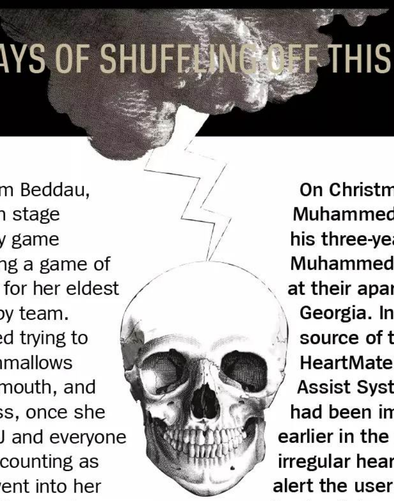
AND MUCH MORE...

FORTEAN TIMES 443
ON SALE 21 MAR 2024

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



Natalie Buss, 37, from Beddau, Wales, was invited on stage to take part in a party game challenge after winning a game of bingo at a fundraiser for her eldest son's under-10s rugby team. The challenge involved trying to cram as many marshmallows as possible into her mouth, and according to a witness, once she got to seven, "The DJ and everyone in the audience was counting as each marshmallow went into her mouth. She was laughing at the same time, and it was like she sucked the marshmallows further into her mouth. One minute everyone was enjoying themselves and whooping, the next she was on the floor. It was dreadful to watch it happen in front of you. First-aiders went forward to help, and someone said they had gone for the defibrillator on the wall of the school opposite. But it didn't help – her airways were blocked by the marshmallows." Beddau RFC extended condolences to the family and described Natalie's death as "a tragic accident". *Sun, 11 Oct 2023.*

Retired attorney Ronald Lewis, 77, of Houston, Texas, was arrested by Texas Rangers at Harris County Jail after two inmates died and several others became seriously ill. Lewis was charged with possession of a banned substance in a correctional facility, and officers confiscated the legal papers he was carrying. It was suspected that the inmates had overdosed on drugs that Lewis had smuggled into the jail soaked into legal documents, which the inmates then ate or smoked. "Mr. Lewis visited 14 inmates from July 2023 until November 2023. During the investigation, approximately 154 sheets of paper were believed to be laced with narcotics and confiscated," said Harris County Sheriff's Office spokesperson Lt J Wheeler. When tested, the papers were revealed to contain methoxy dimethyl oxobutane, a powerful synthetic cannabinoid. *yahoo.com/news, 20 Nov 2023.*

In Washington DC, 85-year-old Steven Schwartz was arrested for the murder of his wife, Sharon, 81. Police arriving at their apartment found Sharon suffering from stab wounds and Steven with "self-inflicted injuries". Both were taken to hospital, where Sharon later died. A spokesperson for the US Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia said that Steven "did not want to eat the pancakes she made and stabbed her in the back." *CBSNews.com, 15 Dec 2023.*

On Christmas Day 2022, Muhammedou Tarawally and his three-year-old son, Matarr Muhammedou, died in a fire at their apartment in Atlanta, Georgia. Investigators traced the source of the fire to Tarawally's HeartMate 3 Left Ventricular Assist System, a heart pump that had been implanted in his chest earlier in the year to control his irregular heartbeat. It is meant to alert the user to any problems by activating lights, symbols, sounds and on-screen messages via a connected app. According to court documents filed by Tarawally's widow, Fatou Nguda Secka, who is suing the manufacturer, the device "catastrophically failed when its System Controller, due to a manufacturing defect in one of the battery pack's three battery cells, internally shorted, overheated and experienced a thermal runaway." The document goes on to allege that "As a result of the thermal runaway, the battery cells in the HM 3 System Controller combusted and/or exploded, and the HM 3 Device stopped pumping Mr Tarawally's heart, causing Mr Tarawally's death." The fire started by the "thermal runaway" then spread from Tarawally's chest, igniting his body, his clothes, and the bed he was lying on, filling the apartment with smoke, which led to his son Matarr's subsequent death from smoke inhalation. Secka is also suing the apartment managers as the fire did not set off any alarms or activate sprinklers and was only detected when a neighbour smelled smoke. *lawandcrime.com, 21 Dec 2023.*

The Midi-Pyrénées Skydiving School Association has been fined €20,000 and an unnamed pilot banned from flying after he was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter by Montauban criminal court in France. The pilot had taken Nicholas Galy, 40, up for a skydiving jump, but immediately after the drop started to descend towards the aerodrome, striking Galy with the wing of the plane on the way down and instantly decapitating him. The court heard that there had been no discussion on trajectories between the Galy and the pilot, leading the lawyer for Galy's family to condemn the pilot's "recklessness or negligence". The case has led to improved security measures and obligatory briefings being introduced for skydivers in France. *BBC News, 23 Nov 2023.*

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